
HOLOHAUS-6

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SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher Mcdonell for intimate creatures

to nekosattva for glass silhouettes

to rumor hell for the ghost schemas

to Amara Reyes for lifted wings

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who sees this

Synopsis

by: Escher Mcdonell

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.

Last Time

essin patrols with the dung beetles, tours animal control's secret installation and reminisces about the Mask Game

CW: blood, military sadism, body horror, eye horror, decapitation, sexual innuendo, guns, artillery, animal death, animal captivity, sex, implied abuse, censorship, disaster, confinement, starvation, cosmic horror

Trucks capped with mounted speakers roved the neighbourhood. That night's curfew would start early and be subject to strict enforcement. Animal Control special operations units would be active in the neighbourhood beginning at eight. News broadcasts joined, radio station and gibber bulletin and news crawl repeating the announcement. Wheeling out the trash to the dumpster, Essin looked up to a cloud-strangled sky. Eyes bleared and gritty in the corners from their sleepless night before. The parking lot cannon fired with a boom that thumped the back of their ribs and they didn't wince. As dusk crawled up from the east, helicopters thrashed the air, "This is final notice. A special curfew is in effect." Essin imagined new

cats swiveling their ears, dwelled on whether or not they parsed the words.

"Bring your bags?"

"Yep." The Cat Shits had assembled in a playground in that overgrown neighbourhood reach, the Moss Land, where Essin and Lacie had gone to their first Darling class. Tentative Halloween decorations were out matte plastic pumpkins and cotton spiderwebbing stretched over brickwork. Grocery stores hadn't been able to ship in pumpkins en mass as usual so the price was through the roof no porch here had gourds, some had made pathetic turnip jack'o'lanterns. A controller tested their hatchet by splitting a park bench's back, another inspected ammunitions.

Sunset crept down, tinting towards magenta, then its pink deepened towards red. A cage banged as it hit the pavement.

"Red sky at night, boys!" voice boomed monstrous through a mask.

"It bodes."

"It does."

"Blood night."

"Blood night! Blood night!"

"Blood night?" 383 walked beside 425, they'd sidled up next to one another behind as the little regiment fanned across the street. 383 carried the cage, since they had no notches.

"Red sunsets mean good hunting," 425 said. Their hatchet bounced a little on their shoulder pad as they marched raggedly into the neighbourhood. "Blood night."

Gunshots scalded dusk. 383 half-jumped. A controller, the one with the sei tally, was firing into a house.

"You see one?"

"No," they said, "Some motherfucker was watching us." And pointed to a garage, which had acquired new holes. "Hope they didn't have anything precious in there."

"So? Let 'em watch. Cat Shits are about to save their asses."

"I don't like people watching."

"What, are you going to get fired from your day job?"

383 wasn't clear where they were heading and so asked, "Where are we going?"

"The mall."

And 383 genuinely did not know why the other controllers carried bags — flimsy old fabric sacks from Dollarama and the grocery store — until a hatchet cracked the jewelry store case.

"Should we hit the electronics store up?"

"Can't get too greedy. Tomorrow night maybe."

As they left a controller turned to flip off the security cameras.

It was blood night. 383 swapped the silver cage between hands when one became tired, and they thought that this reflected poorly on them and that a real soldier wouldn't have this issue. New animals and animal controllers that sheer months earlier had bladed the dark gave them a wide berth and it grew wider as they snuffled through suburbia after new cats and loot.

425 didn't participate in the debauchery except when new animals arrived and they were suddenly lithe with hungering cruelty. 383 heard their chuckles warped in their headphones as 425 pasted a new groundhog to a fence or went after a new fox with their machete.

The Cat Shits climbed roofs. When 383 nearly slipped someone yelled, "Careful you dumb bitch!" and chuckled, and where the band met a fence they took their hatchets and cut it down. They roved. Set fires to trash cans. Gore paintings marked their course. The moon glowed pure: the night was cloudless and its crescent mimicked a hatchet's edge. A controller tottered, a huge new rat head on their pike the new animal didn't need its head connected to its body to function so the head gibbered and wheezed while two other controllers punted the torso back and forth to one another as it scrambled blind to get somewhere it could curl up and grow a new head. It wouldn't have the opportunity.

383 waited for the Cephalon to chatter at them, bleating that they should focus on their task, but if it cared it didn't say anything. "All right!" a Cat Shit shouted aeons into the operation, "Party's over. Let's fuck some pussies."

To the edge, then: new cat territory, slipping quiet and

careful through the shadows that pitted suburban night. Hatchets holstered, guns out they stuck to cover and padded soft. Ghosts across the suburb, whispers shivering between their silence. New cats in a pack slunk near a sidewalk by the transitway patrolling, 383 guessed their strange eyes roving and surveying the streets around.

"Places people," muttered over the intercom. "And... Action."

And the controller who'd decapitated the new rat's head and kept it for what Essin assumed was a trophy swung the pike. It flew off like it had been launched by a lacrosse stick and landed on the gray road with a hard whack and rolled. The new cats spooked, stood, still, their bristles on end and scrutinizing the twitching head, smelling meat. Five new cats, wary, padded onto the road and gathered around the head, sniffing at it and then scraping it with their beaks. One was old, wiry, calico, and 383 wasn't sure but felt it must be the one they'd seen transform.

Gunfire broke bushes: new cats burst like rotted pomegranates. Craters opened in the brush as their frantic eyes cut holes in the tree trunks. A lone maple collapsed, moaning, crashed into the street.

"Go!"

And 425 bolted out from the underbrush to the frantic new cats wailing and confused sidestepped the holes erupting in the asphalt by their feet and grabbing the lone cat the bullets had spared by its scruff, pushed its face to the ground. It was the calico. It wriggled and shook. Holes opened where it looked and used its eye but controller Cat Shit 425 was steering its head so it couldn't turn its killing gaze on them.

Kneeling with the calico pinned among guts, the new rat head still mouthing damp nothings, the controller reached into their satchel and pulled out the awl case with their thumb as a wedge they popped the snap.

"Shh," 425 cooed, "Shh, shh." Voice rippled, deepened by monstrous electricity in a way that left 383 shivering as the other controllers emerged from the bushes, someone far off yelling, "Yo bring the fucking cage dude!" the new cat had dug a crater now wide enough to swallow a person in front of its face and as it fought and growled its eye hit a power line and street lights died.

"Hush, little one."

The new cat screeched. A wail that carried as the breeze, rippling over the collapsed tree in the road, tore loose leaves away so they tumbled and rasped across the pitted asphalt.

425 wiped the blood from the awl, left a dark slash on their kilt.

"Piece of cake," they said, dangling the creature by its scruff while it still kicked and howled, mourning for its own lost eye. 383 opened the cage and 425 lowered the new cat in.

"383 you're on new cat duty. Keep the bait alive."

They were midway past midnight and returned to their fortress in the ground.

The next band of patrolling cats found the spilled pack. Their wails rode on the wind. As each new cat heard it they took up the wails and others heard those, and took them up too, until it reached the new lion who joined them with a roar. Sleepers woke and even those in the seniors' campuses whose neural entropy crept towards total vegetation woke to lucidity, understanding the outer sadness that mirrored their own looming ends. They didn't

stop, the new cats, their sorrow. They filled the trees and by moonlight they mourned. (Only one person who'd disregarded curfew prowled along with the controllers, observed the extent of the new cats' sorrow and made notes on the new animals' intelligence.)

383's locker room had acquired a sink, a supply of canned cat food and two metal bowls. Balm and bandages for the wounded eye. They patched it as best they could, daubing jelly from their finger and hoping the wound wasn't too severe. The calico had stopped wailing and now warbled, peeping now and then like a wounded robin while 383 worked. They shucked their mask and suit, dumped them on the floor. As the light on the door handle turned green to say they could go out, Essin stretched their fingers through the cage bars, touched the new animal. A cat's soft hair had been usurped by stiff oily bristles.

Essin thought the winter would be unkind to these new creatures, though perhaps they'd grow a second pelt for winter. But then shouldn't it be growing that coat now? Uncertainty tasted them as they touched the new cat: was it leaning into their fingers? Or just responding to the touch by moving and, unable to move much in the cage, had moved into their touch?

They glanced at the mask that still bore no notches and turned into the dark hall to follow the green lights back to their bed. Lacie had curled herself into a pebble, hands folded as if to catch her breath.

***

Once 383 had assembled the plan in their mind they were dubious about whether or not the new cats were bonded enough for it to work. But it did. The Cat Shits put the blinded new cat in its cage in the open and waited on rooftops, until other new cats gathered. The first night they were on a sportsplex roof and looking down on a parking lot. New cats slipped from the brush to the pirrups and howls coming from the cage. Through the bars they took to cleaning the wiry calico, which shivered. 383 hadn't seen their sophisticated tongues yet, shaped like fern fronds with many leaves, and with these soft blades they washed the injured cat.

"Cute," someone said, as they loosed their crossbow. As the new cats bolted to the brush one was snagged in the back and convulsed and tripped, rolling over and twitching on the ground. Guns got two more. One was hit by a pin-tipped tag and escaped. 383 hefted the cage: a bar was gone, as though one new cat had been carefully trying to

erase it.

The skull-masked suburban SEALs consulted a radio tracker and followed the tagged new cat back to a den it had made under a backhoe with many other new cats. This was a situation for incendiaries.

On the way back to the mycelium the Cat Shits looted a gas station and a Denny's, using their thermite on the safes and stuffing fabric grocery bags. They smashed the windows and threw in a new cat carcass and again flashed their middle fingers at the cameras.

Through Operation Violin, 383 remained the bait's steward. The new cat didn't understand its role and began its plaintive howling as soon as it was abandoned. Its cries grew worse each time 383 picked it up, an effective lure confused as to why its friends had gone away.

Lacie quaked in her sleep and Essin remembered the strangeness they felt the first time anyone had kissed them and they'd slipped their hand up his shirt and felt muscles sliding under their palm: how like touching a dog or a cat, and how much this had surprised them. Their fucking was expedient, sleepy, without her ferocity or their supplication.

"How are things at the book store?"

"Busy."

Fire rose over the street lights. Pumpkins came in at last, prices falling, and jack'o'lanterns decked out the porches and sat on hay bales supervised by scarecrows and plastic skeletons. New cats knotted to the carnage and charged attacks with electric violence agitating their hides.

Whatever intelligence was blossoming in them it wasn't enough to stop falling for the trick and falling for the trick was becoming less necessary as the Cat Shits learned the new cats' limitations and habits and began to hunt them down. Their heads decorated fences and their skins bled on bike path pavement like discarded grocery store flyers in rain. Dead leaves gathered around them. New rabbits sniffling from the bushes gnawed on their bared and bullet-snapped sinews. Something in 383 contorted away from the cruelty but in contorting away the tension it generated made it more violent when they eventually caved and it wasn't long before the first tiny, tidy, serried notches decorated their skeletal cheeks. (They would long remember this had happened, but the moment itself would be lost.)

Their locker was well stocked with canned cat food and

Lacie's fingers felt over-gentle brushing their chest.

All viciousness ended when the Cat Shits spotted the new lion on their thermals — they rushed away. In her anger she evaporated houses. Cars disintegrated, their leaking fluids tainted the air. What was intact had so many small holes in it that building or mattress or body all looked as though they'd been used for shelter against a besieging army. But the controllers had fled, her rage had no satisfying vector, Lacie's kisses were slow, a gradual play where her tongue slid on theirs and for a few moments sensation numbed the booming night.

"It would be nice to talk to you sometime."

"Same."

And their landlord shrieked upstairs, "Just go the fuck *away!*" — as a chair cracked against a wall.

Regular controllers now joined the extermination effort. They were taught methods for sneaking up on new cats, how to distract their attention, frighten them, trap them. They laced the neighbourhood with steel jaws in low bushes that caught the new cats and on hearing their howls' pitch a computer chip triggered an explosive charge. Cra-

ters turned soccer fields and playgrounds to tiny Sommes. Water mains burst, the new lion roared, children stumbled schoolward blinking off their interminable and sleepless night, escorted by diurnal controllers.

383 didn't name their new cat because they were afraid of what naming it would mean. Its wound had by then scabbed over, blood turning a vivid lilac colour as it dried, and they were certain now that the new cat leaned into their fingers when they reached through its cage bars. Smoke threaded over the neighbourhood with the dawn shadows fell from them like shivering sundials. Coolness settled in and people griped about how Halloween wasn't going to happen this year with the special operation monopolizing night. Jeweled necklaces and gold garnished the Cat Shits, among their grisly trophies glistering in the street lamps and they shot and looted and the range around the new cats closed. In desperation the new lion rampaged, blocks vanished and houses thrashed and banded controllers were forced to scatter, but wherever she wasn't the Cat Shits were, hounding her brood to extinction.

And at last they were nearly extinguished, all domestic controllers were involved in the special operations and

even surviving citizens militias spread out at the dusk with the Cephalon's tacit approval, grim-faced with improvised weapons and hunting gear, wild-eyed from the protracted sleepless weeks.

(And they, too, hardly noticed the shaking ground.)

They were closing on the new lion who'd claimed their neighbourhood its own. And regret was almost tangible when report spread that the new lion had vanished as in this small corner of the world its new cat charges were expunged. The senior's homes were free and people left their apartment blocks without terror. Helicopters flew overhead and trucks announced that the state of special operations had ended. Happy parents bum-rushed the supermarket and looted its candy aisles. Halloween would happen after all. The neighbourhood erupted in splendid decorations almost overnight, parents going wild, jack'o'lanterns multiplying on porchsteps and electronic skeletons spouting spooky noises and the dollar stores emptying of plastic weapons and masks and costumes and creepy-crawlies on elastic strings, lights garlanding eavestroughs.

The ground shook. Shells arced to the webbed craters and trenches in tilled soil where the siege still rolled, status

unknown.

383 kept the new cat in its cage in their locker and they had expected at some point it would disappear. Nobody had taken it or come to kill it, however its food was not being replenished any more and the stocked cans were dwindling. It mewled. They smelled the suit for another change but it was still rainstorms and rotting flowers as they slipped in and when they were wearing everything but the mask they stuck their gloved fingers in the cage. "I'll figure out something to do with you, buddy," they said. "You can't harm anyone."

And to their astonishment, through the glove, through the mesentery, they felt the new cat: it purred. (Cephalon chatter in their headset said something about a new special assignment.)

It wasn't the same as an old cat's purr and Essin'd assumed the creature had lost the capacity: it was more like a stick dragged across ribbed wood. But something in them disintegrated. They'd hardly had to touch it, this time. They weren't even moving their fingers, and though they knew old cats purred when they were in pain as much as when they were relaxed or joyful they knew from the quickly-healing wound on the calico's face that it was con-

tentment animating the cartilage in its throat.

"I think," said 383. "I'll name you Mabel."

Thunder rolled through the mycelium halls.

And as it echoed 383 knew they were wrong about reason for the new cat's purr.

They'd had nothing to do with its happiness.

It was happy about what was coming. Thunder cracked again, the tunnels moaning as though they'd been heated suddenly by a blast from the sun. 383 wrestled their mask on and without thinking grabbed the new cat's cage, spilling its water bowls as the green light blinked on the doorknob.

"All controllers, this is Cephalon. Faunal incursion is currently underway." A roar, ragged throat turning air to concrete. (Carrying through the labyrinth and sounding on tympani deep in the soil.) "All nonessential personnel exsanguinate mycelium network. Cat Shits prepare to conclude mission."

"All right," it was a controller voice, low. "383 we're pretty sure the boss bitch is heading for you. We'll mark a

path for you the usual wa "

383 was in the hall when the voice cut out and something rocked the walls. A blast boomed that they heard more in their external microphones than felt: the hall ahead had been shattered diagonally, holes corroding a course down and to the right. The roar followed.

"This is Tertiary Cephalon." The Cephalon's usual voice was usurped by someone with a thick qeb accent, harried and deep-voiced with shrieks in the background. "Primary and Secondary Cephalons have been denatured by faunal incursion."

"Fuck!" someone yelled from the background, "Just euthanize the samples and get out of here! No I *don't care* about fucking procedure, just do it."

"Portal control center is offline," Tertiary Cephalon continued, level voice wobbling. "Releasing all doors. Requesting assistance from nearby districts." The lights on the doors winked.

And then it struck their skull like a hydraulic bolt, *the lights on the doors were off.*

"Please attempt to exsanguinate or seek shelter until the situation is under "

Thunder cracked through the fortplex underground labyrinth, walls shattering as two bolts bored holes through the ground after the first and the Cephalon fell silent. A door fell open, hinges scooped away by the new lion's eye and inside a person was half-missing, their mask bisected and the precise erasure of half their head leaving the brain not even time to bleed.

"383? 383 you still alive?"

"Yes," said 383. "I am."

"This is 425. We're buds, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, listen to me close. We're working with the army guys. I'm pretty sure she's after the cat. We need you to get to the exit behind the grocery store next to the Starbucks. Do you know the one? Someone drew a dick on it."

"Yeah," said 383. "I know the one."

"Okay, you're going to tell us when you're a few seconds

away from the exit. When you get out, bolt right and run like hell."

Something was crumbling down the holes in the ruins: pebbles skittering and dust.

"Do you know how to get there?" 425 said.

"No. Do you?"

"No. Without the Cephalon I can't guide you. Can you figure it out?"

Pebbles and rubble were falling now in torrent. Piling on the ground through the diagonal bore the new lion had made.

"Yeah," 383 said. "I think I can."

"Okay, don't drop the new cat, whatever you do. She's after the little shit and this is probably going to be our best chance to kill her."

383 had taken the halls long enough that though they were doubtful they might have had a shot at finding their way back but exception raised its face: the new lion's shot crossed the way they'd come, to walk into the path meant

risking she was looking down, that their limbs and organs would swiftly be expunged, and she was close enough they could hear the new lion's furnace breath.

They turned. Bolted for the door they'd taken enough times now to know it lead to a stairwell down.

The door swung shut and, as two flights down they leapt the last four steps, it blew from its hinges with a nauseating thud and gonged behind them on the stairs. They didn't have time to reach the familiar hall, just picked the door on the first landing they reached and went through. Behind them the new lion's eye shredded the air the fortplex duplicating its throat and the wide manufactories the bellows of its lungs and suburbia's bedrock became its tilted diaphragm: a roar duplicated through the wide mycelium that spread across the city and infested the lungs of everyone twined by that concrete web so their guts and bones vibrated together.

383's visual lenses jolted, blinked, reset. Settings scrabbled through reboot diagnostics. And since this happened as 383 passed through the door they couldn't tell quite what it was that they saw, infrareds turned to a blue-green spectrum setting that shifted to sonar visualization that oozed across their vision with swirling sonic fronts. They

went by touch. They flew forward blind. A setting displayed eddies in the air as pink swirls, a magenta plunging a pin-like pain into their hindbrain. Wild flows coursed around them, swirls making miniature singularities, suggesting violence. The tears were obvious when the new lion fired her eyes again: all the air bolted to fill the vacuums in wounded space. Their mask reached true colour: they were on a catwalk: the catwalk overlooked an expanse where grotesquely massive centipedes, thick as arms, roiled over each other and

383's sight was knifed by white light.

The suit's pleasant, airport lady automated voice system jabbered in their ear.

"Caution! Pluto-Class Information Hazard detected! You do not have permission to witness this activity. Please leave the vicinity and report to a knowledge auditor *immediately*."

They looked away and the suit's eyes switched to thermals, which they knew at least would be somewhat useful as they groped towards a door. (New cat purr on the cage bars vibrating their knuckles.) A ludicrous hissing filled the room and the new lion growled and whipcracks from

her eye carving air walloped 383's shoulders. They turned in time for a steam blast from whatever it was in the pit below them: broken arthropod bodies blowing hot wet clouds as the new lion opened them.

At last again the lenses switched to infrared. 383 was through another door. Bald lights dangled from the ceiling over skeletons on beds. Petals. A lone eye. Another new cat? No, a new deer was in the room, relaxed on a raised bed looking at the broken yellowed human bones on cots arrayed before her and nonplussed, which meant only that she knew she was safe from whatever was coming.

A crack deafened 383's right ear. Holes ahead and holes cutting a gouge along the wall to their right. She'd missed by inches. The new cat rowled, its purrs shook the cage walls. The easiest way back was to find the first blasts she'd made take the diagonal back up and then follow the hallways they knew. They opened a door. A locker room. Another. A third two controllers huddled inside, one jerking off the other while they nuzzled their masks together, indifferent to the carnage. A fourth, concrete barrenness wallpapered with new animal skins stitched together: bristle, chitin, scale. Her claws raked dismembered doorways and gouged the concrete floors and her

huge haunches burst lightbulbs in sparks and booms that joined her footfalls in the hunt. A fifth door lead to a narrow antechamber. They had to squeeze sideways through the narrow door at its other end hoping that it wasn't a closet.

It was a jungle. Mists coiled around 383 and trees absurd and ancient reached for a concrete sky, painted with still stippled clouds.

"383, you still with us?"

"Yeah. Why the fuck is there a jungle down here?"

"A jungle? You probably shouldn't be seeing that."

"The info hazard warning isn't going off."

"Whatever. Do you have an ETA?"

"I'm just trying to stall it so I can get back up."

They pushed through the brush, thuds behind them as the new lion's eyes picked apart the narrow entryway. An electronic voice boomed across leaves as long as 383 was tall.

"*CONTAMINATION DETECTED. CONTAMINATION DE-*

TECTED. CONTAMINATION DETECTED."

And broke through the brush. A ladder lead up to an observation deck, 383 ambled up with the new cat cage held only with their ring and pinkie finger and were up on the deck, into a room that was empty except for a table with two still-steaming cups of coffee. Trees burst and splintered as the wall broke and the new lion stamped in, her pelt glowing gold and just visible through her wreckage but thankfully still without a sightline to Essin. They dived. Turned. Legs wobbling. Their skinniness was attributable only to that they worked on their feet. Their breath was ragged and their nethers were chaffed and damp and uncomfortably cold from the mesentery's temperature system.

And they saw it, then, light trickling slantwise down the hall. They'd found it, another vertex in the new lion's attack on the Cephalon.

It was a strange tunnel, difficult to gain a purchase on: its sides were like a chipped obsidian arrowhead from the spherical scoops the new lion took from matter and its flats were under a loose scree formed from uneven fragments that Essin had to shove aside to gain purchase. They heaved themselves up, the blind new cat rowling in protest

at being jostled in the cage, 383 leaping gaps and gaining footholds on wall-thick fragments until they'd gained the four stories they'd dropped. They recognized the hall. The floors were scrawled with gashes from the new lion's claws like those left by figure skaters on ice. A low, frustrated growl rolled from the building's bowels below. And they climbed, they trusted their gut and their awareness and the weeks they'd spent following the green lights, knowing which doors to hit, knowing which handles would break free, which stairwells to climb, familiar with the sloping ramps. They were 383. 383 would guide them up against the thundering one-new-animal stampede behind them.

And it was 383 that knew the last stretch, the last long hall before the dip into the interminable mycelium network that Animal Control had carved in the ground. A second last roar 383 would know in that place and the last from the lion as 425 said, "Are behind the grocery store?"

"Yes!" shrieked 383. "I'm in the hall! I'll be out the door in like ten seconds!"

"You have five."

And the hall tore open behind them. She stood in the dim lights. Her eye glowed green as it had in the valley

jungle that was by then nothing more in her mind than the coolness a passing shadow leaves on a brick wall in summer — the place where she squinted through the night at insurgents in the underbrush, before transformations had addled and altered her link to the matrix of chemicals and experience and instinct that bred all recollections, in human animals and nonhuman ones. She was an alien to herself but she was a protector of her regiment and she gazed at the jittering thing in its skeleton mask that shielded itself with the cage containing her charge so that she couldn't use the danger in her own radiant eye. She slobbered. Outrage electric coursed in sinew and muscle and bone loud enough that her vibrations were audible — the walls rattled, the light bulbs popped and left her silhouetted in shadow, a lens on the face of the strange half-living thing before her cracked and she knew it would die as all those who'd hurt her so far had died.

It eased out through the door.

She heard it sprinting to the right as quick as it could. Bunched her hind-legs. And sprang.

This all happened within four seconds.

As that fourth second cleared the cannon in the Starbucks

parking lot fired.

In a shrapnel typhoon. Shredded by canned beans and GMO tuna and pineapples gathered by slaves in distant countries and lentils grown on the prairies and rotisserie chickens who'd gently tenderized in their own juices since they'd first been skewered on their spit that morning. Surrounded by lettuce chopped to fragments by linoleum and concrete and shopping cart steel and plastic red baskets, sardines and breakfast cereals all the colours of candy and puffed wheat. Extra virgin olive oil turned to napalm and phosphorus, boiling bagged milk inadequate balm and cheeses melting to absurd reeking slag. Halloween candy at baffling speeds rupturing bodily integrity, bright packaging becoming razors as their contents were pulverized and turned to toxic glue.

***

"You still with us, 383?"

They were.

They'd been picked up by the blast and deposited with a thud in parking lot thorn bushes, face-first.

The new cat they'd almost named Mabel shrilled and howled in outrage.

"Yeah," they said. "I'm still with you."

"Great work," said 425. "We're going to confirm she's fucking dead and then mop up in the base. You take it easy."

"Understood," 383 said.

"And I'll take care of the little one."

A woman stood over them in the dusky light.

She wore long sleeves, fleece in forest green, and she'd cut her rattail. A tattoo's vertex peeked from the cuffs. She was pointing a gun at them, a huge pistol that looked ridiculous in her little hand though 383 knew she'd have no trouble using it.

And all Essin thought to say on seeing her again was, "You won't dissect it?"

She lowered the pistol. Grabbed the cage from the bushes.

"Hm? You're one of mine? No," Amelia said. "I'd very much like to but my body's guests want to form a symbiotic bond

with it. They think it's had enough misery for one life. Anyway, I gotta run."

"Wait!" Essin scrambled upright, stood, lifted their hands to their mask.

"No waiting. Can't you feel it? In your feet."

"Feel what?"

"The grootslangs. Did you forget? They've been burrowing up. The ones in the countryside those ones were taking the quickest way here but a bunch were underground, sleeping. They probably heard the new lion passing through their territory when it went after you guys. Now that they know where you are, they'll be coming here. If you have anyone you'd like to live, you'd better find them."

***

A chorus of car alarms heralded their arrival, the rattle of coordinated artillery so low overhead that the air pressure lifted 383 off their feet and dropped them on their ass on the pavement. Raucous gulls swarmed above, fleeing the city.

And grootslangs breeched the earth, through tarmac and

box stores, night shoppers spilling out into the parking lots as hulks split outlet roofs. From Walmart, and Staples, and Sport-Check, and Future Shop, they burst, boxes of electronics and shoes and stationary and pens and beach balls and budget groceries and garbage bins and televisions tumbling down those sloping forms as concentrated shell fire began hammering on hills of fat and bone and cartilage and new meat rose higher than all the rooftops in suburbia.

They were heads.

Enormous, ambulatory heads.

Jabbering, moaning, human heads.

Yes, they were a ragged quilt of fur and scales and feathers and chitin, fins by the thousand pulsed on their sides and antennae swiveled by the million at their crowns, but a pair of massive eyes peeked from each round body, a triangular nose, a familiar expressive mouth in the familiar placement above a chin opened wide on sets of blunt, enormous bicuspids. Their bellows sounded above the shrieking crowds as they shrugged into the neighbourhood, teeth grinding into the detritus their arrival had created and slouching through cracking houses to the fortplex.

Lacie was at home. Or had she said she was working tonight?

They ran. In their suit, they ran.

Controllers ran from the grootslangs, like fleeing graveyard spirits, others with blunderbusses and bazookas hitched to their backs, taking no heed of those who ran, found positions and fired. Essin wondered briefly if they ought to report for duty then dismissed thought.

It seemed, as they grew closer to home, to Lacie, that all sorts of new animals moved at the grootslangs' feet, or perched on their horned magmatic scutes: new pronghorns striding with unbelievable quickness on their two legs, yodeling, new cranes with hundreds of beaks wrapped deep in computation, new raccoons with their tails on their mouths, tumbling down streets like tumbleweeds bouncing off car-roofs, some grabbing the tails of others to form chained raccoon-hoops, new mallard ducks, two-headed animals the size of elephants, waddling, shaving treetops into their gullets. It was as though this new fauna were denizens of living hills, like the terrain itself was becoming a new animal on which other new animals lived. It gushed now into the neighbourhood. And it may have been an illusion, something brought on in the flurry

of the moment Essin witnessed that Boschean zoology at the feet of those clambering hulks, brain filling in its hazy impressions with what it understood, not what was there but it seemed as though the animals flickered in between their newness and oldness, their present shapes and their originals new shapes and old shapes frolicking together amid the thundering incoherent speech that boomed from those tremendous heads in an expansive, incoherent sermon.

They went in through the back yard, wrestled free from their uniform, left it in a pile on the ground around the house's corner though its scent tagged behind them. If it was found they would deal with the consequences.

Essin kicked in the basement door, not even closing it behind them. Lacie was there, she was sweating and panting and turned.

"It's grootslangs."

"Yeah I fucking know," shouted Lacie.

"Fuck. Look. They'll kill us if we don't get out of here," Essin said, plucking at her shirt, "Come on."

And they saw the creatures framed in the entryway at the top of the stairs.

New rabbits.

"You didn't close the *fucking door?*"

Essin saw their shapes, the Darling's organ pulsing on their back as they sniffed around the open door, long ears prickling over their eyeless heads, to spot them.

"The bathroom," said Lacie.

They bolted.

Smells like rain and body odour. Slammed the door shut. Lacie closed the bathroom blinds when a new hornet hive came loping to snoop at the sunken window. (It wouldn't hurt them, but it would have drawn attention to the house if it started studying the couple.)

The new rabbits scratched at the door. Essin and Lacie huddled in the shower stall and hoped that it was far enough away. Essin smelled her breath and touched her stomach she stood stiffly. A vexed glance told Essin just how both confused and angry she was that they'd forgotten to close the door.

They stuck to the far corner. Around them, through the walls and the ceiling, they could hear the howls and cacaphony, the tremendous thrum and rumble, houses imploding under grootslang feet, bombs blowing yards to smithereens.

By nightfall hungry worms tunneled in their gut. Each hour brought more new rabbits. Their scratching at the door grew incessant. Now and then they collectively activated their Darling's organs. The doorknob grew hot. The paint turned to pimples that ruptured in smoke-puffs, reeking burnt chemicals made Essin's throat clench and itch. The shower curtain quavered and melted a little but if they pressed to the wall the radiation couldn't reach them. The door held. The new rabbits would exhaust themselves, rest for a short while, and Essin thought that maybe they'd given up. Crashing and cannon fire sounded outside and they weren't sure whether time ticked towards a shell or a set of gigantic teeth shattering the ceiling. The new rabbits scrabbled, claws nicking the door-bottom.

As night fell, the adrenaline wore off. Essin hit the light switch but the power had failed. They peeked between the tinny curtains and over the houses opposite soot wrote slurs in blurred cursive on the sunset. The street lights

had surrendered their vigil. There was nothing to do but sleep. They took turns, one sitting on the floor while the other stood and watched the roasting door.

Far-off, houses splintered. Titanic heartbeats shook the foundation and shrieks flew through the night like explosive bats.

Against the noise they tried burying their faces in a towel, but it felt like the thunder in the outer night was twisted into their DNA. Noise wouldn't end. Violence's choir wouldn't falter and between the missed meals and the adrenaline their very bones seemed to shiver. It was enough, finally, for Essin to drift through short dreamt islets that arrived so softly they were hard to separate from reality.

Light cut thin through the blinds and the new rabbits were still scratching. The door's paint had burnt away in a black corona and linoleum tile had melted in a patch shaped as though charredness oozed under the door. The skittering and gnawing came from points almost as high as the ceiling. New rabbits, Essin guessed, piling on top of each other. They were famished. The only thing in their gut was water and the shit they'd been holding in, to put off stinking up the room. They peeked out the blinds.

A thick frost had fallen that night, a sudden dip in temperature: silver dust coated the lawns and the trees and the rooftops, shone faintly in the shadows. It was quiet. The stampede had passed. Essin thought they spotted a new coyote slipping sheetlike over a fence, but it could have been something else. They didn't know if the grootslangs were gone or if they'd just passed through the neighbourhood on the way to the city. They could see a diagonal gash one had cut through the street — the trail of rubble, two houses flattened and two adjacent held up by each other's leaning over their mutual missing halves. Sourceless meat smoked in chunks on the asphalt, a bomb crater in a neighbour's front yard. Lacie and Essin curled against the wall, saying nothing to each other, hearing nothing but the persistent new rabbit claws and the quiet air roaring outside, the high winds over the silent roads, all furnaces silenced when the power lines fell under the grootslangs' cheeklike shanks.

At last Lacie spoke, "When you weren't at work I was scared they'd got you coming home."

"You stopped by work?" Essin said.

"Yeah, I was nearby," she said. "Just coming home."

Why couldn't the rabbits disperse into that carnage? Wasn't there easier meat somewhere outside, something immobile for their proboscii? If the new rabbits didn't finally burn or burrow through the door (their transformation had denied them the gnawing teeth that would have made easy work of it) and kill them, it seemed probable that they were going to starve to death, waiting for rescue to break into what Essin was certain must be their totally entrapped neighbourhood.

They failed to notice that no heartbeat rumbled in the ground.

Around noon the high-pitched cartoonish sob of AC sirens whined through the neighbourhood. The new rabbits, hearing this too, scattered from the door. Essin watched out the window, new rabbits scrambling through the backyard just as Animal Controllers arrived and leaped from a personnel carrier with flamethrowers until they recognized one wore a mask totally unlike the others, a blackened, ruined leathery thing. One flap from his shirt was one untucked.

He looked at them. Gave a thumbs up with a mauled hand. Followed the others after the new rabbits. Paused to gather a crumpled AC uniform.

They at last cracked the door. Lacie pushed outside. A grootslang sloped over the house. A mortar was buried in its brain, its chin crushed the back fence and frozen streams of congealed blood ran from its nose to pool in the grass. The Controllers didn't even talk to them, just put up a screen over the back window, and with amazing speed covered the grootslang's body with a tarp. By mid-afternoon, heavy logging machinery arrived to disassemble it, its chunks taken away in the backs of unmarked white trucks.

The new rabbits had destroyed the kitchen radio so they had to wait for the internet to come back online to check the news. Grootslangs were in full retreat, hunching their way back out to the countryside, vanishing into the mouths of their enormous burrows. The news said Animal Control had driven them back, but it seemed clear to Essin that it was the frost that sent the grootslangs back into the earth.

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When 383 returned to the mycelium, they found their uniform hanging as it had been, though the mask was tilted on its hook. They ran their fingers across the mesentery membrane, sniffed it: the rain was fully winter now, salt-seasoned, crisp. They slipped into their clothes. And without

the Cephalon, they were free to direct their own patrols, and so went looking for underground literature while they protected the neighbourhood from new animals.

The next pamphlet they found was in a birdhouse on a tree: a picture taken from a helicopter of a lady standing on a grootslang's back, scribbling in a notebook. A caption reporting that, when AC swept in to arrest her, she rappelled down the new animal's side, onto a new caribou, and dashed off into the countryside at half the speed of sound, clutching a cage with some unidentified small creature in it.

The basement was full of leaves blown in by grootslangs, bombs, and wind. It felt like they spent weeks sweeping up half-crushed and crinkled brown leaves. They seemed to multiply in the corners, fragments or stems whose ends reminded Essin of a frog's webbed feet. Lacie twirled them in her fingers.

Their landlord had not been killed in the debacle, and said he'd fix the bathroom door, eventually.

Halloween came.

Children in masks trick-or-treated through the ruins,

passed through the stunted shadows of crushed AC fortplexes. Through the force of cultural coagulation or coincidence, all adults had the same idea, and dressed as devils, and fistfuls of candy rustled in pillow cases and fabric bags.

Addendum:

from Darling, Charles. *DOG'S NEW MINISTRY! A PRIMER ON OUR PRESENT ERA*. (2XXX) Abyssal Press. HAZARD: MARTIAN: final classification pending. NEPTUNE-candidate REVIEW ANNOTATION BEFORE ACCESSING.

WARNING: IDEOLOGICAL HAZARD (IH). UNCLASSIFIED IH ITEMS SHOULD ONLY BE VIEWED BY INFORMATION CONTROL TAXONOMY BOARD MEMBERS. IF YOU ARE VIEWING OR HAVE VIEWED THIS DOCUMENT AND ARE NOT A DESIGNATED BOARD ARCHIVIST, REPORT TO A KNOWLEDGE AUDITOR IMMEDIATELY. ALL ACCESS SESSIONS OPENED TO THIS DOCUMENT ARE LOGGED AND REVIEWED. OPTICAL MOVEMENTS ARE BEING TRACED.

And it's no coincidence that the grootslang comes from *under ground*. A pure expression of the heart of the matter! We don't need to see them. All the other facts (their hybridity, their violence, their incredible strength) will misdirect you from the essential is-ness of the grootslang. They come from the earth because that's where the earth archives its atrocities.

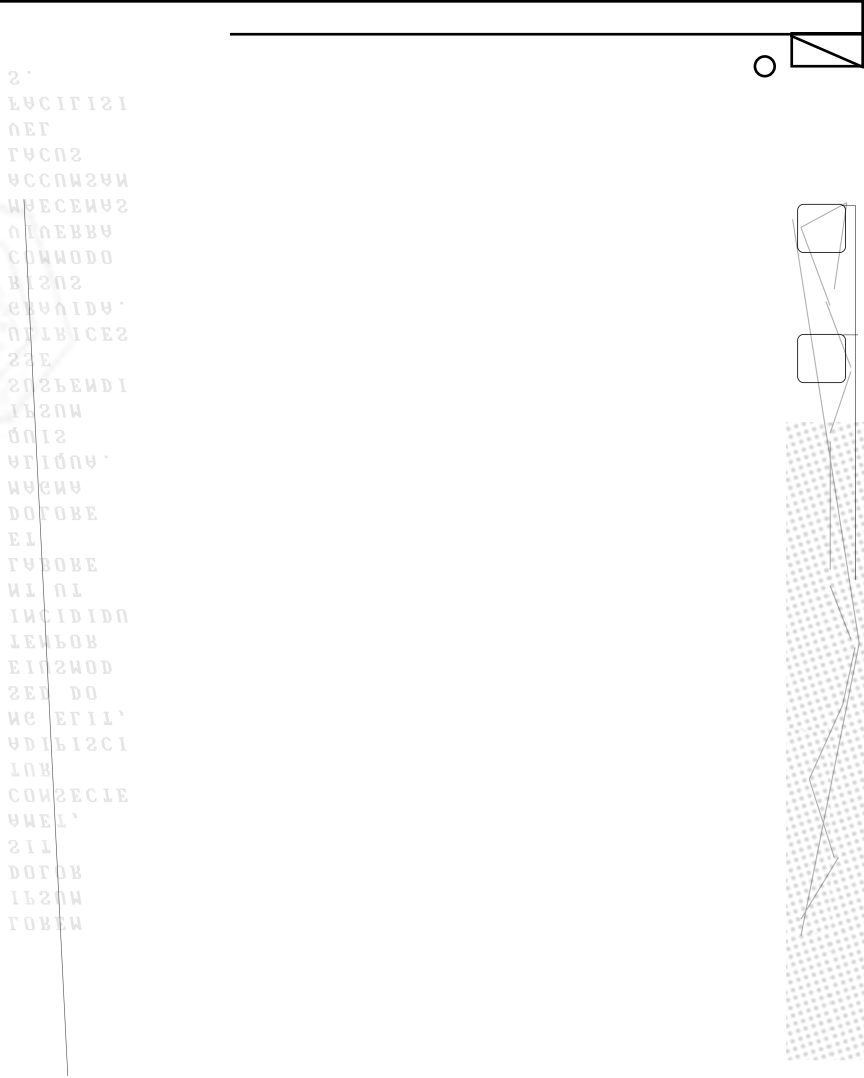
This is why time has not stopped accelerating since the industrial revolution. (Some past theorists thought history stopped, the future ended they mistook for stagnation the motor's cyclical explosive roar as it careened with increasing speed at a wall.) Between coal and oil there's time and all that time contains. Predation. Fragmentation. Death itself, extinction, strata on strata, compressed, fermented, brooding, breeding, mutating, transmuting into hydrocarbons purified until all taint of the living system that sustains us is gone. Becoming something else. All that biological kinesis and chemistry locked away in a planetary sarcophagus, purified and parceled safely in stone.

Then some dipshit Prometheus figured out we could burn it. And his necrocratic sons have been at it for two hundred years.

The long miraculous murder-fest that carved all living things. Those idiots burned it.

And what you burn, you breathe.

Dog help us all.



SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY

Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



by: nekosattva

Last Time

yelena and natalia take sanctuary in a hospital under fire and continue learning the ways of nay-toe

CW: fascist ideology, manosphere ideology, heterosexual pornography, male nudity, sexual Orientalism, homophobia, reproductive sexism, guns, war orphans, mass destruction, ethnic violence, genocide, sexual harassment, identity horror, bullying, sociopathic impulses, murder, involuntary institutionalization, separation

They drove beneath arches of glass that rose like pillars from black craters. They were jagged and coarse, glistening; held within them were remnants of the past, captured in amber. Light shimmered, dancing from one shiny surface to another, 'cross the cracks of marble and wood... the world of glass has won, every single shambling corpse encased and made rigid. Blackened human forms held a singular pose... a permanent selfie, glimmering brilliantly in smooth coffin mountains. The world of glass has won. A violent beat fizzled beneath her, crackling along to every spat lyric. Chiseled figures stood on the horizon, morning dew dripping from their leaden limbs. Yelena rolled down



6.0

the window, and a deep pungent smell quickly conquered the vape stench. "The air here is alive," Groypee groaned. "Alive," Yelena muttered to herself. The air must sap its vitality from everything else, which lies inert and solid. The entire city was crystallized; bus stops and houses shiny, storefronts filled only with glittering stone. They parked the van before a ministry building, on which a gigantic bronze emblem was adorned with stars and an eagle soaring over fields of corn. She could not read the top; the letters were foreign to her. The bottom read: "Ministerctva Kulturj," Ministry of Culture. The trees had turned to pillars of salt, and the soil was porous stone with curious little gems of light green and yellow. A tank had tipped onto its side, encased in glass before it could touch the rubble-littered ground, torn open like tissue; it hung permanently in the air, beneath a stoic wave of rock, as if Nay-toe had suspended the very properties of the Earth itself. Yelena felt her heart flutter; this could only be the holy land.

THE FOURTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« Over time, 'druzhina' began to become curious about the world. They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, what is the meaning of life?' 'Prakh,' he answered. 'To be the dust in

which Nay-toe's dreams are free to roam, unburdened by the inconveniences of flesh.' »

Samuel approached Yelena, his face partially obscured by vapor clouds. "This is the based camp," he pointed towards the ministry building, its interior endowed with apocalypse-proof bunkers and weaponry storage. "We hang out here... chow, work out. You like organ meats, Lena?" Groypee and Paco unloaded their equipment and cleaned their guns, giving special attention to their AR-15s... softly rubbing down the receiver, polishing the barrel, adjusting the sights and zero-ing them in... the warmth of steel beneath their fingertips, burdensome blood drying 'neath the sun... yes, pull on the action and make yourself taut, bloodied and red like a beautiful wasp, riddled with recoil shudders, faces hot with the irradiated glow of the Zone, the taste of metal in your mouth growing louder... a perfect communion between man & steel. "Come on," Samuel stretched his back, studying the horizon with a hand above his eyes. "I'll give you the grand tour." Alec had a grin as he came up behind Yelena, squeezing the upper guard of his shortened AK-74. "I insist, my Queen." She thought of running, to hide in the hills; the hills were glass and concealed no secrets. In Nay-Toe's realm, we see right through each other. The world of glass has won.

In the courtyards, a platoon of boys had taken camp. Some of them slept on stone; others, on discarded plastic. Homes were fashioned out of old personnel carriers and vans, plane fuselages, tank chassis. Various trophies stood on posts made of rusted weaponry; sticky anime figurines, Japanese pornography, hair pilfered from influencers, tattered books. Underneath the canopy of a petrified tree, a few boys lifted weights made of old automobile parts, muscles sharp, veins swelling. Above them, a few boys were stretched on all fours, pointing their testicles to the sun in prostration or offering. "Maximizes T levels," Samuel narrated. "We need to stay fit to survive." In the middle of the encampment laid an altar on pale stone, stained with dried blood. Stuck to the altar were thousands of little pictures of women, some modest and others not, floating in a human sea. Yelena plucked one from the altar, the paper was warped and wrinkled, its edges frayed from being hastily cut. The girl looked like Christine; her thin brows and soft face, a distinct mole beneath her left eye. "Some of the boys enjoy brides of the Orient because they are submissive, but I think that's no fun. A high T male should take pride in the challenges of conquest." Yelena hid her disgust by biting her tongue; even in the holy land, thoughts were merely repetitions of another's fantasy. Are your thoughts not your own? When you close

your eyes, do you only see what you'd been given? If the interconnected world revolved in patterns, in that which is likely and thus predictable, then she too must swallow the patterns; to be repeated is to be defeated. Nay-toe has made even flesh a pattern, fungible and replaceable. These women are merely pieces of a motif, freely interchangeable, of some value on the global pussy market depending on how slut futures go that day. And in that way alone, they cease to be anything more; every feature stripped 'till it's bare and shaven. Yelena tore the picture of the girl in half, into quarters, to free whoever she was from the bondage of utility.

Past the courtyard, the ministry building revealed its secure interior through a crater. The debris had been cleaned away, though pieces of the missile remained embedded into the walls. Bombing the Ministry of Culture seemed to Yelena a cruel joke; raining death was so meaningless to the perpetrators that even those far away from any battlefield who spent their days approving tapestries and censoring poetry collections turned to vapor in a Tochka's glow. Some of the offices had been preserved in glass too; beautiful carpets lined the walls, and a woman covering her eyes laid beneath the desk... her body was blackened, and her skin looked like chalk.

"The bunker is where Alphas live. We keep a tight hierarchy," Samuel yelled between tokes of his vape. The entrance to the bunker was guarded by two young boys, endowed with a sharp jaw and broad shoulders. They were dressed in old military clothes slightly too large for their bodies. They opened the large, scorched door to lead Yelena and her compatriots down a long corridor hot with steaming pipes. The stench of watermelon and nicotine hung on the walls, and there were print-outs of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius above dusty and pock-marked desks that filled many of the alcoves in the bunker. Yelena saw old communications equipment, antiquated computers; first aid kits strewn all over the floor beside rotting cots and trampled military rations. Two portraits were covered in broken glass from their unceremonious descent down the wall. "Were there survivors?" Yelena asked no-one in particular. Alec chewed on dried liver, while stamping his foot on a ration to watch its cold, greasy contents spurt forth. Samuel motioned at Alec, preferring to keep things moving, further down the corridor... Yelena felt her eyes burn; above them, chandeliers beamed brightly onto delicately-carved black and white stone, and long pillars guided the vision up towards blood-red carpets and marble statues. Nay-toe's will suddenly falls back into shape; the Ministry of Culture's bunker had been protecting human

cargo of considerable importance. Did you save them, at the cost of the others? Nay-toe could be so cruel in its wisdom.

"Follow me, to the bedroom, my Queen;" Samuel pointed to the top of the stairs while sucking on his vape. Alec pressed up behind Yelena, not without some glee. Yelena followed Samuel up to a room decorated entirely with flowers; from the chiseled roses on the ceiling to the tulips and marigolds of the carpets. Beyond the window, where the world should have been, stood instead glossy paper printed with palm trees and ocean-y blues. They deny her the fantasy of another world; those realms lying beneath trees, hidden away from the sun. No; come play in the emerald shade. Run through rivers and fields. Trees are not boundaries, but suggestions of an infinitely green horizon. No; not anymore. In its place, a bed with yearning petals made of cloth & lace, threatening to envelop its prey in dead-still comfort. Above the headboard embossed with carved vines tightly binding flowers, a thought was etched into the wall:

THE FIFTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, what is the role of children?' 'Boodooshee,' he answered. 'Children will cre-

ate the future; by any means necessary. That is why the spirit of Nay-toe lies utmostly with the youth.' »

Though Alec's demeanor was always blunted, he had a knack for picking up on Yelena's thoughts; E.S.P. gifted mos def, she thot. "You're probably wonderin' who Kali Hichi is," Alec groaned. Samuel shot him a glare and adjusted his pants. "He's a local GOD; turned up after the Big Bang. People saw everything turned to glass and they probably wondered why... so they started talking 'bout NATO this, NATO that." A time before Nay-toe, she thot again. Truly, an age of ignorance. Samuel cleared his throat, then took another drag off his vape. "Slave morality, Lenochka. They look to GODs for aid because they believe themselves to be weak. The thoughts of a crushed people. They'd rather be underneath a GOD's shoes than in them." Yelena could muster no sympathy; it was merely Nay-toe's will, like a wave or a bolt of lightning. "Their men are flabby, feminized. Hounded by bitch-women. They'd rather eat beans than see the red of their enemy's eyes." Yelena wipes away some of the dust from an old portrait; thick eyebrows and long, dark hair. Living in the ruins of another woman's dream.

Samuel took them further up the bunker, through

a few hallways that connected to a balcony. Many of the boys had gathered down on the courtyard beneath, their faces bruised, their bodies exposed and slick in the sun. Yelena had not seen a single not-boy; Alec stood in the shade, lost in his own thoughts. Samuel approached the balusters, his arms akimbo and his chin held taut and rigid. He extended his arm in a wave; the crowd of boys cheered, extending their own arms in a sea of colors-- the commandment to strength, to sheer will, seemed to be more important than the color of skin, even if only temporarily. She remembers seeing their socials, underneath shimmering pastel colors; "Seeking: physically-fit romantic men who love combat and are capable of marching twenty miles a day." She now understands the meaning of their name, these are the "Crystal Centaurs."

"What lays before us, in the stars?" Samuel pointed to the crystals on the horizon, occluding the sun. The crowd cheered. The balcony shimmered with reflected light. Samuel hushed the crowd with open hands. "What lays before us in the stars?" He cleared his throat and begun to speak.

"I'll begin with a story. I'll take you back to the age when men and GODs walked the same Gaia. Close your

eyes. Imagine a sea in bloom; a sea that can bloom, and be so fertile it births a generation of GODs. Yes, they rose from the sea, and stormed Olympus, and through conquest conquered the Titans to take their rightful place as the greater GODs. And so they did... to sit on their throne up there in the sky. And so to become drunk with power; the GODs were arrogant... yes, they grew to be dour, old, ugly, sour and vain. Except for one; the son of Night herself. He looked into the face of Zeus himself and saw him for what he was: a blusterous fogey prone to a child's fits. And he mocked him for it. Yes, this son of Night mocked them all; Juno, the wife of Zeus, for her bickering and her jealousy. He mocked their children by showing the obvious deficiencies of their creations, and in doing so revealed the deficiencies of the creators themselves. Yes; the son of Night was the first prankster, and for that he was called Momus, and he shows us that the enemy always reveals themselves for who they are... one merely needs the bravery to let them. And yes my brothers, bravery, for Momus was rewarded for the stupidity of others by being shunned by his peers and expelled from Olympus... truly, very relatable."

"But don't be discouraged, my brothers. I'm merely speaking of those amongst civil society, who sit on

their thrones, and judge those beneath them. Yes, these are those jealous of youth, of real human vitality; knowing neither, for they sit atop their mountain boring themselves with women and little games. Jealousy is the reason they send young, beautiful men in droves to die; not for honor, not for the camaraderie of battle, but merely to satisfy their social whims, their lust for property. Yes, jealousy, towards those who are about to die, who know of joys that remain foreign to the catamites and eunuchs atop the mountain. It is us who know glory, the glory of battle, who know the sweetness of peace, who know the pain of losing a fellow commando. This is reality, my brothers; it's the bit you take 'tween your teeth. It's the stench of blood in the night after a heated battle. It's seeing your fellow commando turn to meat and bone at the very instant of contact with an Mk. 153 SMAW."

A few men pushed each other in the front, wanting to start a pit.

"I'll tell you another story. After the fall of the age when men and GODs walked the same Gaia, and man aspired to surmount Olympus and become a GOD himself, Gaia descended into violence and war. Gone were the days of playing games and indulging in little thought experi-

ments; now came the time for glory, now came the time for Sparta," a few cheers from a group of white boys; "yes, and none had the pleasure of glory more than General Brasidas; the original G.O.A.T. Look at their children today; obese, addicted to alcohol, ingesting G.M.O. garbage by the truck-load. No... if the kind General Brasidas was here today, he'd personally execute every single one of his progeny. No... let's remember the great General himself. After the ending of the truce between the Spartans and the feminized Athenians, the Spartans took it upon themselves to thrust forward for the attack. Brasidas, as the distinguished general, recognized an opportunity to defeat the superior force. You see, as a Spartan, Brasidas didn't believe in cunning or tricks; no, he had no need for the witty sayings of a certain Sun Tzu. His strategy was to be bold, to be aggressive; it was to earn his glory in blood. Yes, he led the charge himself, thrusting his body into the very eye of the Athenian army's left wing. It was a bloody battle; it was a bloody success, my brothers. Rather than sacrificing one of his men, or even one of his lesser allies, he took the very first hit himself. He died right there on the battlefield, surrounded by his men-- who would carry his corpse home and sing of their great victory, and their heroic general who gave his life for the glory of that victory."

A few men raised themselves on the shoulders of others, arms stretched out in cheers & cries, trying to climb the ruins of the Ministry to reach the balcony.

"Yes, and surely the Athenian aristocracy spurned Brasidas; they laughed, and called him a fool for wasting his life on glory-- a life that should have been wasted on acquiring property and molesting boys instead. My brothers, know that a spirit tied to the dead-air of politics and property is not a free spirit. No, the free spirit, the searching spirit isn't found amongst the orators, the preachers, the politician who takes it upon himself to represent 'the masses,' 'the proletariat,' the people;' no, it is the fool. The searching spirit is found amongst the masturbators of the marketplace, who seek for an honest man with a lantern and find none, who dines amongst the dogs. It is the fool, scorned by those atop the mountain, who holds close his open heart and makes use of his open mind. They must use this searching spirit to incite, to use the wilderness, the perverse; they must wear the disguise of the madman to bring shock and scandal amongst the masses-- and inspire true radical thought amongst the few. Yes; it is you and I, my brothers-- the very few who know the meaning of the provocations, the 'memes,' the banter, the vulgar commentary, and the truths they conceal from all those

lacking the searching spirit. Yes; it is you and I, fools in arms, the very few, who are sensitive to the speaking of the heart... only a searching spirit has the sensitivity necessary to understand such things that those atop the mountains merely find amusing-- pity their disability of deafness! They are content in their world of plastic, in which lines are rigid and all contradictions resolved. No; we must be their negation: free, but disciplined. Spontaneously calculated. Inspired, and erudite. We defeat dogma, but with authority; we reject the choking hands of the external, and sharpen our own strict fists."

Many of the men raised their fists, in emulation of their heroes; anyone who displayed strength, regardless of the banner they marched under.

"But let me return to the original question: what lays before us, in the stars? Night had two children my brothers; Momus, the god of mockery, and Nemesis, the goddess of retribution for arrogance. Our enemy believes himself to be superior, believes himself to be superior to everything, even nature and its bright stars. So what lays before us? I already see the stars burning within you, gentlemen, burning so strong you worry that you might disintegrate yourself in its heat. But don't be scared; what

burns within you is a great thing. Something that no money could buy, and no medical science could understand. It's a glimmer of a return; the return of a dormant force that today may only exist in the margins of the world. Yes, it's there. In the blood-soaked streets of a crime-riddled street. In the pirate ships of the African seas. In the warrior bands of the bush. In the brotherhood of men, who share only a fellow heart for romance. The enemies of beauty are watching us, shifting in the grass; they feel the heat of Nemesis just as we do. So what lays before us?"

The crowd suddenly fell into hushes and whispers.

"I'll tell you brothers. I'll tell you of the time beneath the stars, when Leviathan crumbles. Watch its pieces hurtle into the waters, in awe of how brittle its once impenetrable walls seem. They will free themselves from all cages; linguistic, biological. They will put down the chains. But freedom will not come, brothers. The Nations will flee like sheep, and tend to their flock. They will protect themselves with rockets and bloodless machinery; drones and computers. Fattened on their own excess and decadence, they will seek out others to fight for them."

Yelena saw the twinkling in their eyes; enrap-

tured, and what did they imagine for themselves?

"And those brothers in arms? Those who have heard the call, who yearn to rise to one great occasion? We will find ourselves, and leave this world together. We will form fortresses on new frontiers, where civilizations slender fingers do not reach, and we will inhale the scent of primordial water. We will loot, plunder-- live like pirates on digital seas. We will hone our eyes, and sharpen our muscles... we will fashion ourselves into a sharp object with which to jab into Cathedral's eye. The Nations will come to us, bearing gifts in exchange for our service or our demagogues. And these men will watch atop their eagles' nests, their eyes trained to infinitely expanding horizons. They will cultivate arts and sciences, having no need for comfort or entertainment. Our fortresses will have a grand painting in every atrium, and a perfect dream-weapon in every vestibulum with which to hold the fearful Nations beneath our heal."

The crowds raised themselves, erect.

"Ah; the fear. Well, I sit here in my tiny room, surrounded by my weights and my childish games, smothered in the feminine grip of the Motherworld. When I die, they will pour me into a wooden box and leave it in the

cold and lifeless soil. And through the many million ages, 'till the end of this planet's violent existence, I will never breathe, nor laugh, nor cry again."

They erupt into cheering; an excess of noise so loud it hurt Yelena's hearing.

"So come out and play with me in the milky night, and hold my hand as we paint our skies red. The universe has spared us this moment, and it's ours and only ours to take."

Strange.

With Alec behind her, his hand on his Kalashnikov, two boys came and placed a thick woolen frock over Yelena's shoulders. It was frayed; red edges of yarn, and the hem fell past her knees. She felt Samuel's cool breath on her neck, and he placed a crown made of leaves and flowers on her head. It felt itchy on her chafing forehead, and heavy from the weight. The two boys took her on their backs and lowered her down towards the crowd of boys, who watched her with open mouths and twitchy eyes. Yelena felt the piercing looks penetrate deep into her body; feeling exposed, it was as if her blood was draining from her veins. Samuel took a hit from his vape, and stood be-

side her.

"Behold, my brothers. Our new Mahimata... the mother of the new race."

The crowd raised their fists, and with smiles pledged their allegiance to Yelena; how quickly they put aside their suspicions for her. A few men removed their shirts and begun posing; their fresh muscles bulging, perched like cranes. She could now see their faces more intimately; some damaged from the sun, some hot and blue. Some were marked with scars, others were fresh and soft. Some still could not grow anything beyond a layer of fine bristles. This was truly a brotherhood of man; united by nothing but a shared conviction in undomesticated youth. None of them seemed old enough for credit cards, bills, loans; any of the mundane indignities that slowly rob men of their volatility. I knew you, Mason. I knew you, Vic, with the purple eggplant emojis. I knew you, once, I know nothing now; your empty stares at your phone, waiting in your car. You are stained with the stench of locker rooms. I knew you, Joey, and Jesse, and Eric. You walk in a daze from one vape cloud to another. Your mouths agape for a procession of screens. You are bare-chested, standing shoulder-to-shoulder; you are a waiting room. You are

empty cans of Monster and cardboard boxes filled with grease. You are long nights spent swearing at strangers. You are bottles thrown at the windows of an after-hours Walmart. You are pitch-black nights without stars. Stubble, itching forearms at the cash register. You are wet clay, fashioned out of dried mud and shit. She saw Groypee and Paco; unencumbered by their gear, smiling genuinely. A few of the boys held portraits clutched snugly in their arms; of other women they'd never meet. They were mere icons... an empty canvas onto which one could project his desires; truly, woman was Nay-toe's vessel. Little King Samuel ascended on a stone platform beside a decimated statue.

"Behold, Mahimata Yelena. She will give birth to this new race, the native, indigenous race of the Zone. This new race of men will overcome the primitive apes of the non-Zone; this new race of man will conquer them and destroy their ideologies. He will take the women of the non-Zone, and show them a life in enlightenment, not ignorance. He will show her that in the openness of the Zone, the only rule is the rule of commerce; they live not as domestic cattle, but freely in the open space of his desires. Are you with me, my brothers?"

Yelena saw the men had raised their fists even higher, faces wet with the tears spilling from their eyes. Whatever it was, they truly believed in it; they truly believed a radical spirit was superior to anything lesser, and dared always to take more. To them, the Sun was not a horizon but a window into a world of infinite energy, a world of chaotic energy vital enough to light up the sky, to force the hand of mere chance. Beyond the Zone, there were no alternatives, no choices; blood coursing through her vein was its own delirious intoxicant. She felt drunk; Yelena ascended onto the balusters, a sea of chattering faces beneath her agape with glee and envy and rapture. The wood groaned beneath her sneakers, and she spread her arms as if the sea of boys may swallow her whole. Swallow her whole; in the arms of the crowd, she's mere flesh, shedding the terrible baggage of history and names. To become anonymous, like these boys, is to truly feel one's heartbeat, to truly feel the sensual joy of ripping apart something with your bare hands. Words melt, becoming merely the lubricant of sheer action, the gasoline that helps set flame to the past. This is how Yelena liberates herself;

Feeling upstaged, Little King Samuel came up behind Yelena and forced her onto his shoulders, eliciting a grunt as her body weighed down on him. He ex-

tended his arm; "save yourselves for the grand ceremony, my brothers. There will be displays, organ meats, feats of strength." Samuel walked away with Yelena on his shoulders, hiding her from the glow of the sun. "She should know her place," he thot... "icons lose their power when they begin to speak." He understood the Mahimata's raw power; merely to exist is to take control. "Take Lena to Based Camp's best bunker. The 'long house.' You know what I mean." Yelena felt Samuel's demeanor shift, his accommodating smile replaced by a stern, utilitarian gaze. His face disappeared in a haze of heavy vape smoke. She felt the crown itch at her skin, and she turned her back away from the crowd, which devolved into boorish chanting: "Yeah-len-ah! Yeah-len-ah!"

Alec held onto his Kalashnikov as he walked behind Yelena, guiding her in the shadows safely away from the intense heat of the crystals. In these streets, she saw the instances that were captured; a bicycle still stood upright, and a few cars were stuck solid in the rock like fragments of an amber beach. A food stand had tipped onto the ground; cheburek, shashlik, and a few packages of ice cream were frozen in the glass. A few suitcases sat strewn around an empty balcony. Some of the buildings were bleached, with shadows of figments playing on the

walls. This place was like nothing else in the Zone-- most of the Zone had been repurposed, new life springing from the broken soil of ruins. Here in Glass City however, everything remained in a zombie state of permanent half-life. Nothing could rot away, thus nothing new could be born. The words stayed petrified and meaningless-- apteka, magazin, portnoy, remont. Yelena brushed away the crystalline dust off the glass windows and peaked into the shop, which was a cellular store filled with blackened statues covering their eyes. On the racks, she spied a few chargers with the appropriate connector and called to Alec. "Alec, come bust this open." Once Alec had broken apart the door with a few Kalashnikov jabs, a sudden rush of wind swept through the store, causing the blackened statues to collapse into dust and fill the store with silvery-black smoke. A terrible burning filled Yelena's lungs; she ran back out onto the street and coughed 'til she threw up what little had been in her stomach. Alec laughed, then took a drag off his vape, and his face was bloody red.

They followed the railway tracks down towards the center of the city, which was congested with sandbag emplacements and artillery. Yelena understood the stratagem-- a few BM-21 Grad in the peripheries, 152mm howitzers along key strategic positions; make the cost of as-

sault too great and thereby force a diplomatic solution. An armored personnel carrier parked beneath a bridge was encased in glass; she imagined its occupants nervous but optimistic, mute like sleeping turtles. Past the pillboxes and military emplacements, a few bunkers sat built into the metro stations and shopping complexes. Nay-toe's will was total, absolute; the dream of commerce unrestrained by flesh & blood gave way to the nightmare of defending commerce with flesh & blood. "So?" Alec felt bored by Yelena's narration. She pointed up towards the tower that loomed over the railways, aching with red stars; above and below the broken arms of the clock, it read: dlya tex kto bestrashnije lyubov budet krovju-- "to the fearless, love becomes blood." Up the stairs between two railway tracks sat another bunker, this one decorated with pink roses and crystallized animals. A few young boys stood at the front entrance of the bunker, their H&K G3s looking like oversized toys in their delicate grasps. They stood at attention as Alec and Yelena passed, whispering about what precisely the frock and crown on Yelena's head could possibly represent. Yelena saw a few of them arguing over a checkered board, on which bullets were set like game pieces. One of them saluted Yelena, his voice squeaking and seeming too large for his compact throat-- "privjet, gospoza." He goose-stepped down into the corridors, which still

bore the blue, red, yellow arrows of a once-vast network of trains. An escalator still operating on battery power took them down into the deep dark chasm of forgotten Earth, boring itself deeper and deeper for twenty minutes. Alec suddenly seemed nervous; he sucked on his vape as he watched the light of the outside world grow dim.

The interior of the bunker was filled with delicate furniture, rescued from the homes that did not become encased in amber. Wooden chairs with fine lace, bright colorful carpets on the walls, little figurines and statues of animals, children; in the center of the bunker stood a decrepit statue of a woman carrying a hammer and a sickle, defaced with lipstick and rouge. The only light came from sporadic lamps hanging from the walls, 'round which little insects jittered. Each hallway seemed to lead down into another bigger bunker, which itself led to a thousand more bunkers, and a thousand more deeper within the crust of the Earth, such that the whole of Earth's innards was one massive defensive complex, each one of them carefully and diligently guarded by interlopers. The boy saluted once more, and motioned towards one of the hallways. Yelena followed the motion, with Alec twitching behind her. A few women were peering from the doorways; the sight of Yelena, adorned by the crown, struck them pale and they

retired in a rush, slamming the doors behind them. A few slams deeper within the bunker rattled and resonated through the pipes, like a nervous system contracting in pain. Yelena walked down the corridor, unsure of what she sought; "somebody oughta talk, 'bout something," Alec murmured.

Yelena heard a door open behind them. From a gap in the door, a woman with deep, dark eyebrows and a sharp face studied Yelena. "Privjet," the woman with deep, dark eyebrows said. Alec could not understand, but surmised its meaning: "what's up." Yelena answered back in Russian. The woman asked if Yelena understood Russian and Yelena answered in affirmative. The woman smiled, shut the door to undo the chains and open it wide, and said her name was Tahmineh, and embraced Yelena with a surprising warmth before taking off the crown from Yelena's head. Tahmineh said that most of the "brothers" did not understand Russian, so they could speak privately. Yelena asked about the young boy, who stood on guard by the door. Tamineh approached the young boy and tousled his hair; she added that the young boys were orphans, left behind by previous Nay-toe forces. "These must be

Nay-toe's children," Yelena thought to herself. Tahmineh's warm smile turned to concern; why was Yelena here? She told Tahmineh that she was looking for her friend Christine, who had left for the Zone and went radio silent. Tahmineh's concern turned to tightly-wound irritation; it was Christine's fault for thinking a civil war was an opportunity for making stupid videos. Yelena lowered her head; she sheepishly asked what had happened to the city, to deflect her rage. Tahmineh cursed Yelena for knowing nothing about the Zone and deciding to come anyway. Tahmineh told Yelena that the city was the capital and the largest city, and functioned as the stronghold for the largest faction in the civil war. Nay-toe intervened to stop the violence, evacuating most of the civilians to camps around the Zone, but the faction would not acquiesce and continued its raids and military campaigns against the other factions. The city, Tahmineh explained, was the center of life before the civil war, but the most powerful tribe took control during the mass upheaval and violence and got most of the materiel and factories. Most people fled if they could, or perished in the ethnic cleansing. Eventually the city became a gigantic military base, the leadership took control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, and nothing Nay-toe could do would stop the violence from destabilizing the entire Zone and spreading beyond into Europe... so Nay-toe went with an

extremely costly solution-- an experimental weapon of light so powerful it could turn everything into glass. So they destroyed the city and annihilated one of the factions completely. Now, Nay-toe can maintain the peace and prevent the conflict from spreading beyond the Zone; they figured the loss of one ethnic group was better than the loss of all of them. Yelena didn't know what to say, so she merely apologized.

Tahmineh apologized. She explained that the stress of living in the bunker had robbed her of some of her humanity, and her civilized nature. She had been in class at university when the alert sirens went off and all the men forced the children and women into the main bunker at the city center. Most women didn't make it, but those who went to school or worked in the center had enough time. Tahmineh's rage gave way to a stiff-lipped sorrow; she hasn't been out of the bunker since, as she does not wish to see what the city has become. I want to keep it a memory, a good memory; she smiled as she wrung her hands. She looked at Alec, with disgust, with revulsion. Tahmineh asked if he understood, and Yelena answered no. "Xuilo," she muttered. "Zasranets," she spat. "Skatina," she cursed. Alec felt her anger; he smiled and chewed on some dried liver.

Yelena followed Tahmineh down the corridors of the bunker, filled with many rooms, each of them filled with women. Tahmineh knocked on the door, and shouted that everything was safe and okay. A woman wearing a black veil opened the door, and let out a gasp when she saw Yelena standing there. Who is this Cossack, the woman yelled. Yelena smiled, unsure of what else she could do. Tahmineh touched the woman on her shoulders and told her that Yelena was a prisoner like them. The woman's gaze violently shook from Tahmineh to Yelena and back. She pointed to Alec and said to the other women that the barbarians even take their own as whores. A few flashes of brilliant light. Yelena lunged forward, pushing aside Tahmineh and grasping the woman's neck in her hands. The women jump up and shout, some words incomprehensible, and Tahmineh tries to pull Yelena away from the woman. Yelena sees the woman's face turning pale, her eyes twitching in fear, her face sinking... every cell in her body is aching, screaming in her ear to go further, force the hand of chance, see where this all might lead further down a river of red. Yelena lets go, and apologizes, and tells them that she doesn't know where that came from. The woman rubbed the part of her neck still red and raw, and told Yelena that there was a great and violent brutality inside her, and if she could, she'd smash Yelena's head to

pieces with a rock. She says she'd do that for her country. Yelena looked at Alec, who had been staring at his phone, and told him she'd like to go to her room now to be alone.

Yelena's room stood at the center of the bunker; two young boys were sleeping at the table beside a few lockers. The iron door of the room was painted with a luminous sun, orange and red. Alec took out a bundle of keys and opened the door, which revealed ornate carpets, glittering wooden desks, a soft and comfortable mattress decorated with goats and cows-- on the bed laid a woolen frock, orange and frayed. She understood; she was merely a costume now. A small price to pay for a shower, she thot. Alec tried to follow her into the room, his footsteps leaden, but Yelena shut the door on his foot, looking at him from the gap of the door just as Tahmineh had. Alec played along with a surprised smile; "damn, shanti, not trying to catch a feel?" Yelena smiled diplomatically, but only as long as necessary. "Catch a feel on the others. Maybe go see Tahmineh again." Alec's smile deadened; his foot stepped back like a defeated weasel.

After Yelena shut the door, she felt the intense loneliness collapse onto her head. It felt like flames in

her belly. She searched the locker, the drawers, the toilet tank... the desk had a letter opener, a paperweight, a useless calender, and the drawers were filled with childish little dresses and skirts... she looked at herself in the mirror; her matted hair, her sunken face, pale and burnt. Her nose seemed even sharper, her cheeks even more severe. She pulled the mirror apart from the wall, and found a small cavity in which there were cans of fish and hard bread. The pain in her belly travelled down. She pulled the tab off the fish and drank the oil, tasting of port sewage. She then took the greasy little fish and ate them, with gentle chewing, one crackling little spawn after another, 'till the pain became a dull murmur. She drank the water from the sink, which tasted of chlorine, and felt a few leaden burps escape from her innards-- reeking of death. She collapsed onto the floor, then writhed to slowly expose herself, shed her jacket and jeans and sneakers; she turned on the shower, felt the water cover every inch of her skin, then surrendered herself to the warm emptiness.

Yelena heard a knock at the door. It woke her up. Another knock, impatient. She threw the frock over her shoulders and covered her wet hair; she wished he

had clean clothes. The wool of the frock felt itchy on her body. She opened the door, and saw Alec standing there in the darkness of the bunker's corridor. He said nothing, he merely had a static smirk on his face as he studied Yelena's wet hair. "Would you like to come in?" Yelena heard herself say. Alec stepped in, but he didn't shut the door behind him. She heard screaming further down the corridor. Yelena went to the sink and pretended to wash her face; she took a letter opener and hid it in her frock. Alec approached her; his smirk slowly melted away. "I don't know why I'm here," he mumbled. "Ya know, detka?" Yelena felt her heart race as she set her back up against the cold concrete wall; she thought of where she would pierce him-- in the neck? She studied his body for throbbing real estate. "Why are you here?" She asked. Alec suddenly remembered where he was, his face relaxed. "I'm not gonna do nothing all maz;" his voice suddenly clear. He took his Kalashnikov off his body and placed it on the dresser, then sat down on the bed. "I just thought you'd wanna talk." Yelena stepped away from the wall. "Talk about what?" Alec smiled; he took some dessicated liver from his poach and chewed on it. "Want some?" Yelena felt her composure cracked; she ran to grab the dried meat and the letter opener clattered onto the floor. Alec laughed, choking on a few; "hah, you're so cool." Yelena chewed

on the liver, swallowed it, asked for more; perhaps they preferred her to be starving, and desperate? "I was ready to kill you," she said between chews, "ready to make you bleed." Alec smiled, and he took another bite. "I don't blame ya, detka." He took out something else from his pouch; a large energy drink, filled with sugar and stimulants. "Here, a pre-sen-to." He set it down on the dresser, beside the Kalashnikov. Yelena grabbed the drink, cracked it open with a refreshing snap, and sucked down half of the nuclear-green liquid. "If you wanna give me a pre-sen-to; davai, give me your gun." Alec stood up and took a phone charger from his pocket, placing it all enticing-like on the palm of his hand. "Think you'd want this more," he said. Yelena took the phone charger, cautiously, like a cat above a deep body of water. "Why, Alec?" She whispered. He laughed and sat back down on the bed. "I know it's the wrong move, shanti;" he took out a vape and sucked on it 'tween words. "But you're a pretty batshit, hot-ass girl. Probably something cool will happen if you had access to a phone." Yelena smiled suddenly, almost instinctively; it felt like an alien feeling. "Why are you here, with these bros, Alec? What happened to TayGeneration?"

Alec's smile faded away to something else; he took another hit off the vape. "Wiped out in a napalm strike.

Nay-toe policy is going towards liquidation. The free market experiment is ending. They goin' for just cleaning the whole thing out. No plan for where all the Muhammads are gonna go. Everyone else is headed for jail. Time running out, shanti." Yelena felt for the first time a sense of remorse from Alec-- he suddenly seemed so human, somehow. She sat beside him on the bed, sipping on her drink. "What are you gonna do, then?" Yelena asked. Alec's expression hardened back to a stiff smirk, and he stood up to reach for his Kalashnikov. "I'll be fine, detka. It's kismet. Sud-baa. Like the Little King say, we're gonna be future aristocrats; all top-suited-up in intelligence agencies and paramilitaries. They'll be making streaming-shit 'bout all of us. 'Bout our glories. Those of us that make it back home. Those of us that are strong." Yelena took another swig, then looked at Alec's shaggy hair; his rotting teeth; his sunburnt forehead... he looked like a statue rotting from within. Yelena laughed, covering her mouth. "Do you really believe all that shit, Alec?" His smile remained stiff, as if it were etched into his skull-- a permanent smile. "Belief don't matter, shanti. Only desires do; that's the Zone." He put the strap of his Kalashnikov 'round his neck, and quoted a thought of Kali Hichi:

THE FIFTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« After a great tragedy took their children, 'druzhina' grew angry about the world as they felt their prayers unanswered. They asked: 'Gaspod Hichi, why did Nay-toe create the other GODs?' Kali Hichi thought the question was terrifically difficult to answer, so he took for the mountains, where he sat atop a peak and thought long about the answer. After a long time had passed, 'druzhina' visited him in the mountains, and asked if he'd come to an answer. 'Yes,' he answered. 'Nay-toe knew that someday, someone would have to take the blame.' »

Once Alec had left, Yelena plugged in the phone she'd bought from the bazaar; her skull lit up white above the glowing screen. After a few moments of holding down the home button, the phone flickered into action... the lock screen wallpaper was Christine and Yelena, their heads stuck together, forming one devious grin. She wondered what the password might be, thinking of birthdays, license plates, names expressed in numbers-- she placed her finger on the home button, and the phone swiftly unlocked without protest. "A bug, a mistake..." she mutters. A strange feeling floods her arms, an agitated weakness; beneath the thumb, unable to escape. She locks the phone, then presses her finger onto the home button. Again, it swiftly unlocks, as if reunited with its long-lost master, as

if a long-repressed memory resurfaced again. She scrolled through the apps, unsure of what she's looking for; recognition, or private apocalypse. She taps on one of the socials, heaving red with notifications, waiting for the content to load G-by-G. Christine was gone, but her social media remained a strong presence, haunting imaginations. The comments were full of hearts and daggers, and each private message was its own humiliation. She tapped on the first notification: the screen came alive with a Korean girl dressed in a plastic schoolgirl getup, holding a submachine gun up beside her face.

"Em-pee fivah," she growled. Her name was Jeonghui, or Jay Jay to the Baby Girls fan club; per Yelena, fan number #13221. She slammed the charging handle, went crouch just to show off her perfect marble legs, and fired a salvo down towards a few cardboard targets. The camera approached the targets; they were fashioned into human shapes, with the faces of well-known men stuck to them with glue. Jay Jay smiled, and shone a victory sign to the camera. A few swipes to the left; all of BabyGirl 6 were represented-- Jang-nyeol with the Steyr Aug, dressed in desert camo booty shorts and a halter top; Myeong-Seong, or Mimi, giving a toothy smile and a thumbs up from the seat of a large ZPU anti-air platform; Jessica, her face cool

and detached, reloading an AK-12 with a violent jab at the magazine; at the final swipe, Soo-ah and Haneul dressed in black leather jackets and miniskirts, wielding Chinese QBZ-95s mounted with QLG-91B grenade launchers. In the description, she sees a mention of Christine, at 'Lil-GauuMonster.' She taps the mention-- the screen flickers, and renders Christine standing behind a M134 Minigun... Sunglasses hide her face, and a dark brown parka hides the rest... the video loads, and Christine pulls apart the parka to reveal a long and flowing camouflage dress. From a holster, she pulls a can... "A mouthful of PHOSPHOR in every gulp! My dear little bears, get your own PHOSPHOR energy drink drop-box in the link below." She puts the can up to her mouth, and the camera drinks in every little drop of green-blue liquid falling 'tween Christine's candy lips. She wipes away the run off with her hand, then smiles to reveal a set of grills on her teeth; they spell 'PHOSPHOR.'

Yelena locked the phone, and felt herself sink onto the floor, cold and inert. She rubbed her face, rubbing it raw and red, then pressed on the lock button again. Yelena and Christine's head molten together, of one mind; it was a message she'd left to herself. She remembers it now; the sticky feeling of the parka underneath the hot sun clashing so violently with the skin-like softness of the

camouflage dress. The heavy feeling in her jaw, the way her flesh stuck to the grills. The apps did the rest-- a Chinese face tuning app to morph her mouth, make it smaller, more delicate; color-grading to fix the skin-tone. It's not like Christine's face looked anything like Yelena's face. Nah, it grew to become Yelena's face; the nose reshaped, the lips made fuller, the eyes pulled back by the cheeks, and contacts to fix the eye color. To become one mind, the body must be manipulated, and the minds of the world had created the tools to bring the body in line-- manipulate the inert pixels of a raw body, deaden the skin, and make genetics a mere inconvenience. "Everyone does it;" it is a sisterhood of sorts, a nation bound not by history nor common cause... no, this is the nation of thin waists, delicate porcelain skin, and the faces of rootless exoticism. Her homeland was the air-conditioned mall that stood defiantly on the sandy ruins of those old, weak, forgotten generations. She is Nay-toe's daughter; the whole world lays at her feet in the DMs, eager to touch transcendental beauty.

Yelena had finally reunited with Christine-- the Christine which still existed, the Christine she could hold in her hands. They were once again a single mind uniting two bodies; one inert and silicon, the other pulsat-

ing with burdensome blood. She held the phone up to her chest, as if to squeeze it into her heart, feeling its vibrations resonate throughout her skeleton. Her fleeting happiness soon turned to grief; for what she'd lost, for what she will lose. Christine's body may survive out there on the socials as a reproducible representation, but she could neither age nor be injured; she was a flat canvas on which Yelena projects, so thin she would disappear if seen at another angle. She felt tears well up in her face, willing to admit an emotion to herself for the first time-- a feeling denied to Christine, who had the burden of always appearing 'cunted' and 'snatched.' Tears gave way to guilt; guilt for robbing Christine of her totality, reducing her down to the 'ruff-riding' li'l Asian war-influencer and cutting away anything else. "I'm sorry," she whispered to herself. She had to find Christine in order to finally lay her to rest.

Amongst the wall of interchangeable apps, one aging app stood out with its singular notification. The notice brought about a flood of memories in Yelena's little projector; it was the app Yelena and Christine used to communicate, believing the app's intensive security and clandestine aesthetic to be a reflection of their relationship. It had been dead 'n dormant, abandoned after Yelena and Christine had grown to see mysteries as something to

be hunted down and squashed. A red-hot '1' hung over the pictogram, begging for release. Yelena tapped on the app, which unfolded into a black slate filled with ancient messages. She sinks into herself, and scrolls through the many messages of the past, weaving together to become one continuous thought. There were videos, pictures, little song recommendations, gossip, expressions of fear, of evil. How much of it was Yelena and how much of it was Christine? The usernames had faded away, their minds had been sharpened to form one sharp point, stabbing into the abdomen of the fuck-boys, the boomers, the suits, the patriarchy, neo-libs, capitalism, and everyone else... it's only in these little empty gestures of rebellion where a privacy of the mind momentarily exists.

After a long wait, the message had finally been downloaded. It was the last entry of Christine's diary, dated "7/3/2017:"

"Hi mom, dad. You're probably gonna read this, looking for answers or something. You're gonna pretend you never saw it coming. You're gonna have closed eyes, pretending your tears are some kind of glue and that blindness was something other than every single terrible choice you've made. You might think I did this out of ha-

tred, that I had a heart so heavy with revenge I'd gladly crater onto the concrete and splash myself on all the downtown windows just to drive a dagger thru your ugly black hearts. You are mistaken. You are so so so mistaken. Believe it, even though you are vain-- none of the choices I've made had anything to do with either of you."

"You will grab Yelena, you will box her ears like you did to me; you will beat the blood out of her little face and tell yourself they're answers. Believe me she is not to blame for anything, she's only taught me how to sharpen my little dagger with which I chisel & carve a piece out of rotting earthly wood. I'd like to share something with you, something I hope you could read if it turns out I'm having a funeral soon."

"Like others, I've always felt deeply that I was somewhat different. Unlike others, I've always been treated different. Where others failed, I've always succeeded; I've never not gotten what I wanted, either through stealth or sheer force. Where others are flabby, sloppy I am poised, my hair up like an angry little wasp. I've never felt weak; even when my bones break, as I feel deep hot red blood coarse course through my veins. I remember the very very very first time I realized that the rest of the world

was merely fragile glass aching for a fist: a bully, her fat pale face stinging crimson as she pulled her eyes with her fingers to mimic mine, thought I was just another narcissist little bitch with her stinking lunch-box and ripe pussy for the taking. Right before that very moment, I believed myself to be a fragile flower, who'd wilt away in the heat of the sun if I'd exposed myself to her powerful heat. Then; for only an instant, I looked down at my two hands, I held them fast and cut their shaking. They formed into fists of rock, made of sentiment sediment so hard it could shatter even Jackie's face. I felt my entire body tense up like a spring, and my entire body twisted, then released in a big aching exertion... the bully's face turned into an empty hunk of meaningless flesh, and her teeth seemed no more genuine than plastic Halloween shit. She fell backwards and cry, cried, cried for sympathy. I felt so much disgust for her that all humanly feeling fled my body, and I landed another blow on her head, and I took a chair, and a metal water bottle, and I crushed her face, the way you'd crush a stupid shitty little bug with your foot. A teacher pulled me away, down 'twards the exits; I looked around and noticed that the riotous screaming had turned to stunned silence. She'd stopped crying, and laid there limp, still, in a pool of her own flesh. As the police officer and the principal ran down the hallway towards me, I looked down at my still,

bloody fists and felt nothing stir in my heart of hearts. I felt no fear. I haven't felt it since. Every single moment since then has felt fake like reality TV."

At the bottom, there's a bleeding heart with a dagger through it, flanked by two little smiling kitten faces.

There were a few blocks of space, but the message went on; beneath a vast sea of emptiness, "to Yelena" was rendered in a tender font.

"Dear Yelena. I'm sorry for what I did. Not because of the stupid bitch that I killed, but because it cost me my friendship with you. They're gonna take me away somewhere, and try to fix what's wrong with my brain. Maybe we'll talk after that. XOXO forever, Lena. Love, Christine." The message had laid unsent, until now. Christine had never made it to the Zone, and her final parting words to Yelena had been lost in the haze of the cloud. The 'stupid bitch' had survived, but this didn't make much of a difference to Christine, who now spent her life in limbo 'tween different psychiatric care providers. Daddy paid for the many procedures and institutions just to keep Christine off his mind, and Mommy indulged in whatever she could-- and in time, they would forget. Yelena wrote back

a response.

This was my little act of rebellion. Against the plastic figures, against the mannequins and their vacant planets. A little ball of light. Of pure action. Against the absurd, against the cheap; trapped in glass. The world of glass has won, Christine. It feels sharp in my throat. And it was all in your name because I was a pussy. I cannot put it into words. I'm not there. You are, but I'm not there. The world of glass has won. The message goes unread.

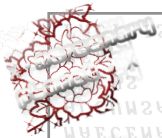
Yelena went through the photos, the videos; both on socials and on local storage, and deleted every trace of Christine's ghostly undead presence. Gone were the bikini pics, the gun-barrelled close-ups, the energy drink endorsements and make-up promotions, the rock-star yoga posing beside tank shells and artillery, the victory signs 'neath helicopters taking the air, the pressing of teeth into cooked or raw meat, candidly dead animals, bombed-out roadside picnics, bottles of vodka 'neath amber alarm lights, the Orthodox cathedrals, the mass graves, the busts of Stalin and Lenin, the ships stuck in teenage harbors, the cardboard houses, the skies of July given way to September, the first drop of snow falling on a child's cheek, the bleeding finger strumming a guitar, light reflected in

a glass eye, antennas trembling in strong winds, muddy footsteps from the front door, the stench of salt water after swimming in the ocean, the vomit after a night of drinking, the morning after, disappointed and sore, and plates of tomatoes, cherries, strawberries hanging on the vine, and the fruit so sweet it brings you tender tears, and the buttons lined with salt, and the stillness of the early morning after the violence of the late afternoon, his breath, his stench, her eyes, the horizon collapsing, every embarrassing moment that just makes you want to kill yourself, the dagger that finds its finger, the bullets that find their targets, shiny and angry, and the bodies trampled beneath the horses, the jokes we share with friends and carry with us and share again after tearful reunions, the last kiss to a loved one, the final embrace of those we never see again, those we leave behind, the steam rising from a cup of tea and dancing like a serpent in the light of a window overlooking a garden, balconies overlooking little fields of light where cars dance like fireflies, and the cigarette smoke takes a violent flight, gone gone... gone, gone they are all gone.

Yelena starts the video, with a beautiful blood red carpet on the wall behind her, and smiles to the camera. The app transforms her face... first the eyebrows are

slimmed down, then the nose is shortened, flattened, then the lips made smaller, and the jaw smoothened and chiseled, with the ears drawn backwards, and the color grading to darken her skin... she pulls her throat into her head; "hey little bears. This is Christine, with what will probably be my last video ever. If you're watching this, it means I've been killed in some kind of ambush and surprise attack. I want to thank all my wonderful sponsors, who've been supporting me and my journey. And I want to thank all the great people I've met along the way; honestly, been touched by their generosity and kindness. It's been a blast, y'all. And lastly, of course, I want to thank all my little bears out there, for being with me along every step of the way, right 'till the very end. You've made this journey of life worth it, and I hope everything good that can happen in this life happens to you." Yelena blows a kiss to the camera. "Forever... love, Christine."

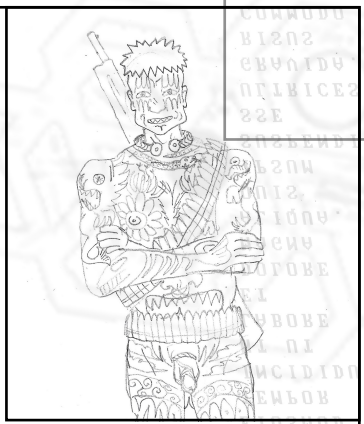
Yelena stopped the video and waited for the rendering to finish before posting it to all the socials. Then she takes her last picture of Christine... she sticks out her tongue, and raises her middle finger to the camera. And with that last post, she killed Christine forever. That was her defense.



by: baroquepiral + Escher Mcdonell

MERCENARY PLANET

POI datafile



Name: Fingal Hadak

Birthday: October 15

Sex: male

Blood type: O

Likes: dates (fruit), "intact" cultures (see Appendix S), "intact" dicks (uncircumcised) & holes (virgin), peyote, animal social structures, novelty

Dislikes: clothing, the Abrahamic demiurge, modernity (except for military hardware), casting pearls before swine, female sexual selection, his past life, the Coven of Black Domnu

Seen with: Jax Lillywhite, Sacred Band of Sol

Theme song: Cut Hands - No Spare No Soul

Fingal Hadak was one of the first soldiers Waldo Beek recruited through his online platform. Not long after he did, Waldo Beek became much more careful about recruiting from his online platform. But he never found someone like Fingal Hadak anyway.

While Beek loves to flaunt his suburban McMansion, rotating cast of wives and dogs, his Achilles (or Alcibiades) has effectively produced the illusion of having no civilian life at all. Hadak obscures his cultural origins along with his identity in general, identifying at will and with zero compunctions about appropriation with any culture he deems "intact", but our research suggests he is likely a scion of almost-forgotten Scottish nobility (at times he will claim a bloodline of Nicholas De Vere's Dragon Court, but doesn't specify which). While his current name (he insisted on adding eight middle ones to his file; he is rumoured to collect them as trophies) is likely cobbled together from his anthropological and mythological obsessions, his family probably doesn't want anyone knowing the real one either. Our investigations have found the most likely candidate for his previous identity XXXX XXXXX, a rather shallow social fixture of the North European occult industrial scene at the time Waldo Beek was making his name

in former Yugoslavia. (This would make Hadak's actual age only a few years younger than his former commander, putting some alarming credibility to his claims about self-rejuvenating practices). Particularly corroborating this claim, XXXXX appears on the staff listing of a military field recordings label that would have had contacts in the areas of Beek's campaigns. But it wasn't until Waldo Beek began producing motivational videos in the late 2000s that Hadak would follow the call to war himself, and there is an unexplained decade-long gap that may simply be explained by XXXXX moving back in with his parents as a complete recluse.

He joined during the highly publicized campaign against the cartels, which Beek was attempting to convert into an actual documentary series for a proto-Tea Party filmmaker before the Mexican government sued them, so there is a surprising amount of footage of his earlier self, a sprightly soldier with the Ken-doll appeal of his decade's male heartthrobs mitigated only by his vaguely sickly complexion - he had only just begun his regimen of colloidal silver, and while he advertises it ev-

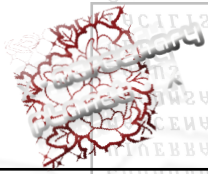
ery chance he gets, its most infamous effects have barely begun to show. The cult success of "Coyote Hunters" is likely the only reason anyone outside of mercenary work would have recognized his not-yet-finalized name in the widely screencapped /k/ threads - "Remember Caleb Hadak? You will not in a million years guess what happened to him", "Evidence Caleb Hadak is possessed, pt. 2". A repeating call in to Waldo Beek's online radio show, "Hey Waldo, why'd you let Hadak leave?", was finally answered on August 6 2014, claiming a "Callum Hadak" was a faggot and had made a move on him. The call ends in disconcerting rambling and laughter from both parties. The legend of Fingal Hadak since then has appeared in an extremely distorted form on bodybuilding forums, achieving Charles Atlas-like health exploits with the help of various magical indigenous teachers and spirits giving him idiosyncratic tips promoted by the posters. While the earliest threads may credibly have originated from Hadak himself or someone in his circle, he has shown the opposite of Beek's interest in online fame; one attempt to contact him in a thread

was met with an anonymous throwaway account stating, “Fingal Hadak does not communicate with those who do not fight.” A significant proportion of younger recruits may, however, be familiar with these threads. Seasoned, professional mercenaries, on the other hand, will often deny he exists in public.

Within the mercenary world, we can find that one of Hadak’s major employers since switching over to a lifestyle and ideology incompatible with most employers was none other than Azoth Inc. His handpicked, all-male, nudist squadron served as nocturnal shock troops at several contested sites supplying a large proportion of Azoth’s lithium. Their victims can rarely be a source of information; often whole militias seem to disappear without a trace. When not employed, he and his closest companions do not return to civilian life but appear to operate as bandits and scavengers in the hottest warzones they can get away with. There is also evidence that they may have been singled out for off-the-record patronage and support by Azoth, which would imply some degree of contact with Hiram Ogier, and raises

questions whether his presence on this mission was really Waldo Beek's decision.

The paradox of the nature of his activities is that virtually all the information we know about him could also be a huge LARP - or even a psyop manufactured by Azoth for whatever reason - but would necessarily look exactly the same if it were all true. And the bad news is, this is hard to actually maintain if you're keeping up an act. If nothing else, Hadak is probably one of the most immediately urgent of the many cults and fringe ideologues converging on the IIEF, looking for their one-time opportunity to direct the fate of humanity, seemingly enabled by Beek and our own patron Ogier.



Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

Last Time

as a newly formed military force prepares to leave earth (and leona begins to build her own covert networks), the us government makes one last desperate bid for control.

CW: cave-in, non-human sexual innuendo, TESCREAL ideology, communications collapse, problematic fiction, dubious consent, discussion of military rape, male nudity, cultural Orientalism, imperial Japan, castration threat, fascist ideology, misogyny, existential risk, solipsism, organized religion, religious warfare, insectoid design, falling, deadly combat, hand horror, disabling injury, death

The rock shook around us, then shook itself back into place.



The familiar bone-chatter of danger was replaced by the wind of the uncanny through my marrow.

Then the rumble and dust-fall started again, and despite not knowing if I could be buried alive I felt a momentary comfort.

I understood the theory behind it, but it seemed absurd that Meteorology, a system premised on letting everything

in reality do exactly what it wanted, could permit a distortion this absurd while condemning something like the Adipose.

This was an instinctual reaction, not an intellectual one. I understood that I was conflating Meteorology's world of Wills with Earth physics' world of Laws. At the quantum scale the Meteorological model really isn't a metaphor, each particle acting on its own terms, too local to predict each other, spontaneously forming order in distributions and negotiations. The principle had even been discovered by observing spontaneous asymmetry that emerged sometimes in quantum computing laboratory conditions (the Meteorological word doesn't really translate to "laboratory"; imagine a sacralized valence of "Playground" - I'll use "Playscape" from hereon in).

I understand it a good deal better now than I've been able to convey to anyone so far on Earth, or will be for a while at the pace of briefing capsules we're sending. Up here, we've been allowing limited, one-way direct contact with Halation for the purposes of scientific education alone. In Meteorology this is taken extremely seriously as a matter of moral principle. While some asymmetries of expertise and specialization are inevitable in any high-tech culture,

it's generally considered a failure of reciprocity to use a technology without making an effort to understand it, at least in a popularized form adequate to most uses - and their technology is orders of magnitude more complex than ours (although most of it reduces to a few simple principles). I had spent whole off days on Plastic Beach just Wikisurfing to alleviate the humiliation of my empty memory when Halation asked simple things like how plastic was made.

The speed of light as cosmological constant can be understood as a function of the baseline lag of quantum information processing throughout the universe. With sufficiently powerful computation, it's possible to push things carefully past this baseline. A cloud of low-density plasma with a semi-permeable barrier is projected around a ship. This acts as a computational substrate the way silicon does for our computers - although it mainly just relays messages from a more powerful and stable solid-state quantum computer within the physical ship. The solid-state computer calculates the desired parameters for speed and trajectory and models the interactions at the surface that would realize them; the plasma communicates between the computer and the membrane which essentially acts as a Laplace's Demon, directly determining particle-to-parti-

cle interactions across its surface.

What happens if it miscalculates, you're asking? Surely this is the existential risk the US was worried about?

There were admittedly some pretty catastrophic failures in the early days of Weak Asymmetry. I can't perfectly explain why they don't happen any more either because I'm not a quantum supercomputer that evolved by statistical self-improvement over billions of years to perfect the art of calculating trillions of tiny particles. But basically if a particle collides with another the mesh of relative calculations across the surface collapses their waveform into two regular sub-lightspeed particles colliding at that particular position and leaves them behind. If you travel by Weak Asymmetry a lot you can expect to lose a few micrograms of mass this way permanently, but nothing you'd notice at human scale; the ships require maintenance for it, most organic life doesn't.

The most insane thing this means is that an Asymmetry Field almost by definition is a mind, albeit a very limited and self-contained one. But it could do other things, especially when it meshed with another Asymmetry Field, including comms.

I understood this now so I wasn't technically as unprepared when the woozy pink haze around the ship started singing.

And yet I felt less prepared somehow. Was it louder, were its overtones more eerie, was the ground under my feet even less solid (like, it was *literally*, I was floating in sideways asymmetric gravity in a collapsing tunnel on a planet made of pumice) than it had been last time? This wasn't the sky singing around two parked cars on a dirt road with an alien in the trunk - an unexplained phenomenon relative to its background, like a "UFO" - I was now trying to place myself in a scene of which not a single part was familiar or belonged to the set of categories I had accepted my entire life as plausibly "real".

Also this time there were two voices and when they overlapped it was only in dissonances, to distinguish their separate voices from polyphony in their individual expression. Not that the dissonances were harsh or disturbing - they were gentle in a way that made harmony itself sound garish, overpowering, like Mai had tried to explain to me when she was showing me atonal music, which I hadn't quite worked into my ear outside of how it threaded between open jazz chords and hits of pop sweetness in her

own compositions, but I had sort of mapped to my experience of sex, the vast continuum of touches that made orgasm alone too jangly-jarring or sickly-sweet -

But through the vibrating strata of affect, Halation was translating for me.

Greetings and apologies - Be reasonably alarmed - Someone has been setting off explosive fungus (not quite, close enough) *networks throughout the chimney - We have sustained and 89 standard units of force, fourteenth exponent and reversed 12, fifteenth-exponent so far - We have not identified the responsible faction - Failure is expected within 8 standard temporal units tenth-exponent without assistance - We would be grateful for your assistance.*

Our Asymmetry Field responded before I could choose whether to address Caroline Bennett-Fog or the guy calculating those units or the field somehow. *Is failure still expected on some timeframe with assistance.*

Assuming unlimited explosive fungus in the chimney, which is unlikely - but assuming amounts designed to overwhelm an Asymmetry Field, having previously confirmed the existence of one - it seems pretty miserable, I thought, and Halation clarified that these minds experienced minimal affect,

but that there wasn't a totally permeable boundary between epistemic particularities and affect, as my imprecise wording had already picked up - *Or, having ascertained its strength, larger amounts in future.*

Is it possible to systematically remove the charges before they detonate.

The closest would be to systematically detonate the charges and then clear the chimney of force - which would require knowing detonation mechanism, though we can assume chain reaction -

Then Halation took over. *"Field Coordinator Hiawatha, sync and calculate maximum extension, maximum resistance, maximum surface complexity with Field Coordinator…"*

"Lung 15 - Upper Dock." Lung, then, was the name of the place we were landing.

The following musical phrase wasn't a word - it rose and fell in the lilting band of possible sound-distributions Ahasurunu language systematically reserved for spontaneous expressions of direct contradictions what Halation had just said about powerful affect. (*It* does *happen, sometimes.*) *What a… strange Asymmetry Field - The code is a shape we've never seen before, like igneous rock fitting into di-*

amond - So much power coursing along such bizarre channels - It'll cost us 3.4 standard temporal units first exponent to all calculations just checking the compatibility of these algorithms - It feels as if it'll fall apart, but if it doesn't - Permission to attempt distributing initial contact heat plus force to maximum surface extension within and only within matter density of 5.57 standard units of density seventh exponent?

That'll just straight up wipe everything out in these tunnels, Halation warned me. The matter density qualification meant the synced field would expand, not directly out through the solid rock as it was perfectly capable of doing, but like a spikeball through the tunnels all throughout the chimney. *"Do we have allies in here?"* we asked.

Yes but they don't go higher than the base plug - 74 standard units of extension fifteenth exponent above local topological average - if we use that as a cutoff…

"Are there other lifeforms in the rest of the chimney?"

A file so enormous started downloading on our screen that it crashed for split seconds that felt like another exponent.

The walls were starting to tremble again. Waldo Beek was looking at me with a face smug enough to go to his grave

with, his lips parted as if supporting a phantasmal cigarette, hands in his pockets. We weren't *going* to *die* - the combined power was enough to resist five times any of the previous impacts the way it had already done. Weak Asymmetry Fields store energy in their quantum state - essentially, the brain is also the battery. Despite being technically capable of reversing the processes constituting entropy at most scales, and using this to some extent to restore their own energy, perpetual motion for a Weak Asymmetry Field would be an unsolvable recursion problem, and you can see them because lose energy in the form of photons and various forms of dark radiation constantly. Interstellar ones are particularly intensive. We charged ours at Azoth's experimental nuclear reactor; it drained the entire supply of plutonium within three days (we had to give it access to the plant's control systems to stop itself causing a meltdown). It was about two-thirds out of gas.

This wasn't about survival, this was about making an impression - solving a problem now so we wouldn't be distracted by it as we settled in.

I didn't want to sacrifice - what, an ecosystem? I had absolutely no idea what was here - for that, just for my pride. That wasn't unreasonable, right?

There was a huge crack and I froze and Halation was thinking fast for me. There were courses of action the Fields themselves wouldn't think of; they tended to propose extremely simple solutions because modelling from the perspective of macroscopic life wasted a lot of processing power. You had to prompt them yourself, and very precisely, to do crazy things like - *the synced Asymmetry Field can use multiple layers at the cost of complexity. In the first - let everything explode and reverse it, transmitting the information on the density of everything it just reversed back to the second layer. Scale: a sphere the diameter of the chimney - hopefully that will be enough; can't risk anything more complex with the amount of computation this will take.*

The walls ground to a halt. The ship had also halted - we were now the centre of the synced field that had been pumping us through the chimney, not to mention was responsible for letting us in.

"What are we doing?" Caroline Bennett-Fog asked apprehensively. I was standing with my hands and feet wide and tense, Halation covering my body in shimmering iridescence like halfway through a magical girl transformation sequence, my second skin a single organ vibrating dense Ahasurunu commands to the Field(s).

In effect: the second - project the matter and energy captured by the first, at its original rate but reversed, through everything at the measured average density down to a third exponent unit. (A total guess at a number fine enough to be a proxy for the actual molecular structure, which the Field couldn't model at every point of its surface without causing another recursion collapse.)

Third - as the rest of the fungus exploded, repeat.

Fourth - expand through the others, to maximum size, at maximum speed -

Two great hollow voices in chorus, a breaching leviathan of song, a fractal howl.

A geyser of heated air erupted from every opening along the surface of the ten kilometre chimney.

On the weathered lips of its caves, bundles of thin, translucent, round tubes swayed gently.

We stayed on the ship to have lunch, and sleep, and do

most everyday activities. Going outside was always a mission of some sort - it was too alienating to treat as anything else - you couldn't pay attention to anything except the space you were in and the task you had to negotiate it to do - which of course I realized meant we couldn't get out of practicing it, and we had mandated regular shifts of EV time.

"But what does all this weird homework have to do with it?" Jax groaned.

"Ask her, she's making me do three times as much of it as you guys," I poked at the bowl on the table, trying to convince myself to eat the pile of long black strips embedded in some kind of umber gelatin our hosts had delivered as a welcome gift, and despite assurances that they had been "molecularly substituted" to be compatible with human biochemistry, I was so far almost alone in eating. "Including reading some really smug guy's 'Sequences'."

The space glittered with beautiful new things. I at least ate lunch on the bridge every day, gazing "out" at the view on the wraparound monitor. To be honest, the base was probably weirder than most places on Towers. The atmosphere that crept through its caverns and reservoirs, while thinner than Earth's and with enough helium to make you talk

like that if you took your helmet off, was mostly normal - except in the bubble the Ahasurunu had sealed off from its surrounding tunnels to fill with bubbles of several different gas giant atmospheres. The ship was currently in Contemplation's; the Ahasurunu, and a few other species, had their own. Schools of creatures that looked like metallic purple maple keys spinning through the mist could freely pass between all of them. A huge cluster of things with four pairs of venated wings fluttering behind them like the folds of a badminton shuttle stuck to the window, probing it with hummingbird tongues, and had to be dispersed with a subsonic pulse. What I took to be a tastefully curated selection of flora and fauna floated by baffling intervals in and out of sight; bobbing like a pendulum in the mist, a megastructure like an organic jungle gym laid out in an uneven grid was barnacled with a sizeable number of Weirs, interfacing with cubes, or wildlife, or these baroque bubble-torpedo vehicles that sometimes did insane aerobatics around us, or the Ahasurunu.

"Whatever advantages we have physically, technologically, strategically or just in willingness to kill might just barely be enough to beat the advantage our enemies - and allies - have that they're used to interacting with completely alien species and environments, and we're not." Caroline

sat down next to me, which I wasn't sure how to get her to stop doing off the job. It's not so much that she thought of me as a friend, though there was a weird cagey respect I couldn't tell how much was for Halation as opposed to for me. Other times it seemed like she viewed me with utter contempt - which she now seemed to be offloading onto Jax. (I ran through my mental database of ways to intervene between them in case that boiled over here.) "The alternative is hard-memorizing all those concepts Halation's worked into the lessons."

"Those are kinda fun honestly, although it'd be easier if we got more contact time, and somebody didn't keep correcting our writing."

Bennett-Fog shrugged with an expression of slight surprise. "That's not me. Might be Tony. He was at Iowa."

"So when are we going out against whoever's bombing us?"

"When we figure out who's bombing us." The information hadn't been formally compiled into a briefing yet, but it wasn't classified either - we just hadn't figured out a format, and some informal transmission was inevitable. "Nobody they know of living in this chimney is pro-Adipose,

but none of them know where anybody else is any more. They're all scared shitless of having to leave here too."

"Yeah, I thought this planet was really solidly anti-Adipose. Didn't the Adipose side blow up their communication network or something?" Jax had evidently already been getting informal briefings somewhere else.

"The computational life network connected to their node organs, yes," I sighed. "Not like something they made, like a whole other species - living satellites. They were formally part of one of the big anti-Adipose network blocks, and have been about 85% wiped out by a virus in an information packet they received from the parent block when it was under attack, plus more recently some kind of aerial bombardment no one's been able to identify. Do you ever read your briefings?"

"Hah, you know I usually skip the lore dumps in games, too."

"Because you knew you could always get me to fill you in on them, like you're doing now."

"You liked doing that, though, right? I thought."

"Shut up."

"That's why you went to college and I didn't."

"Shut *up*."

"The planet was split before its network block got involved," Bennett-Fog took over. Our hosts estimate a large majority of the people here have been radicalized anti-Adipose by this - there's a chance the attacks are even over their peace efforts - but there are probably people who blame the network block for putting them at risk too - and it's hard to say because no one's really in communication with anyone. It's like a planetwide blackout. Which makes it a good place to do secret experiments, or hide a new wild card species. But also... means everyone's going to be extremely paranoid."

"See, you aren't doing it quite like my sister, you talk too fast."

"*Jax*" -

Caroline Bennett-Fog moved food around on her plate, lifted it up, put it down. "I don't mind hearing about back when you used to... edit wikis, right?"

"I still mind a bit hearing about all the things you guys know about me," I groaned. "Although the others pretend not to and with you it's honest I guess. You should be glad I didn't order someone to dox all of Edison Lens and brief me on it, as your commander."

"I am going to continue assuming you're lying and hope you've enjoyed whatever you've found so far."

I *had* used the Clamp network, briefly during its initial expansion, to compile a file on everyone who would be coming with us, but I hadn't paid much attention to personal stuff. There was just too much. But sometimes when I was really exhausted, I would flip through some of Bennett-Fog's Star Trek fic, imagining the characters I'd honestly never seen enough to have immediate mental images of as lush 90s OVA women.

My main concern was who might be especially loyal to any of our enemies on Earth, and who might be sympathetic to my own goals. Caroline Bennett-Fog was solidly neither. And what she'd conveyed in our many, many training and wargaming sessions over the course of the flight (an authority I'd chosen to let her have, turning down similar with Beek) was that she grasped the nature of the power struggle I was inevitably barreling towards, and might

work with me if I proved myself. But for all the test scores, I didn't totally understand what I was trying to prove to her, and wasn't sure if I wanted to.

"It's weird to me that we haven't even seen them yet, though." Jax continued, almost finished his patented Azoth Burger (a meat replacement they hadn't been able to afford to clear for Earth markets). (We were also going to have to start going out on food expeditions soon.) "The Towers. I do look at all the pictures in the briefings, you know."

"The wireframe based on the description in the information packet should be ready by tonight, right," Caroline checked with me. She had barely touched hers, but kept lifting it up to and away from her mouth. (It didn't *taste* bad.)

Halation called the inhabitants by the same name as the planet itself. It sort of made sense with how tall and thin the thing in the wireframe was, at least if it stood up straight, or folded its limbs in the right ways (they were extremely foldable to fit through tight spaces, or extend out across large gaps, as necessary).

I nodded. It had been taking a while because we'd been

building it from the inside out - making sure we understood all the internal organs - Beek wanted a detailed checklist of all the ways you could kill one. This was dragging out into multiple info packet exchanges with sheltered, obsessive biologists - nobody here at the Lung had thought to put this info in one place.

"Vance wasn't that far off with the Pnume." Bennett-Fog finally bit into her burger and waited.

"I mean, if you're thinking Barlowe's Pnume." I scoffed. "But that's all on Barlowe. Vance didn't describe shit."

"Look, I wouldn't have given Vance a second glance if I hadn't spent my first months at Edison Lens sucking up to all the old-timers to pick their brains. My first commander had barbecues with Jack Vance. Cordwainer Smith was *at* the inauguration of Edison Lens."

"You've told me this before. He still like, should have waited half a century to be a light novelist."

"The American backyard, he used to say about those barbecues, where the only place to look is up. Like you can almost see through this foggy blue glass, and there's heaven, or ET, or the bomb. And now, how's this view?"

"I dunno, I don't look at it like that any more? Not like pictures in a wiki either. Like even before we left the planet, as long as Halation's been with me. I don't feel like I'm on the other side of anything. And I'm trying to look at different biologies the way I learned to look at different cultures. Like, it's a different kind of gaze."

"Hmmm, I never did anthropology, but that sounds sad to me."

"Sad how?"

"Like other people on a bus - you can't really look at them, right?"

"I don't think you're talking about the same thing any more." Jax tore a strip of bun off the back of Caroline's unattended burger. "Why the fuck are you talking about buses and barbecues and books, guys. We're in *space*."

Despite everything else about going outside, one thing we soon didn't need to worry about was wearing space suits. About a week (surprisingly, there's a recognizable day/night cycle in this pocke; Contemplation is a "hot Jupiter"

in an Earthlike orbit; but we've had to update a thirteenth hour after midnight on our clocks) after the first data exchange, the Weirs fed us some kind of synthetic fungus that acted as an intermediary metabolism. (For reasons of local cultural significance, we had to drink it in a scalding tea from these flexible bubble-like water sacs woven from a fiber that looked like polyester but was actually a kind of native grass. It gave us a mildly pleasant sparkling tingling feeling for the next hour.) The next day, about 40 soldiers stepped out on a mission to transport a crate of human DNA samples naked. The Weirs had no clothing norms of their own, but knew enough about human ones from my info packet to be surprised by it. I called their leader in that evening for discipline, even though it didn't super bother me, but I was already starting to understand the need for military discipline just to keep my head straight. We had uniforms for a reason! My messenger was told there wasn't a leader, they were all acting as one and would have to be disciplined as one, and would formally request to be treated as a distinct unit. I said whoever said that would be counted as their leader, and was surprised when the face that appeared atop a huge tattooed naked body in my office was one Jax had pointed out from the troop registry to show me on a call when I'd asked him if he was making any friends. Jax had prepared me for Fingal Ha-

dak's unique floral and faunic tattoos, which he flexed in the locker rooms and challenged anyone who called him a faggot over mano a mano. Undefeated to date, he would then prove and disprove his opponents by fucking them smoothly, mechanically in the ass - not rape, Jax assured me, because he stipulated this right before any combat. When I had mentioned this to Beek he smiled wryly and said if I tried too hard to bring this stuff under control I wouldn't have time to do anything else, but also that Hadak was the worst news of anyone he'd ever worked with, so of course he'd had to invite him.

Of course, neither myself nor Caroline Bennett-Fog nor Halation (whose system of ethics around symbiosis exceeded both core simplicity and iterated complexity, in density and flexibility, anything humans had ever managed to hammer out about fucking) were going to take a "boys will be boys" tack to one of the ugliest problems that bedevilled most human militaries before they ever saw combat. (The first time I reached out to my advisor was after reading an article she'd published ten years ago about how rape within armed forces conditions the psychological and moral tolerance for war crimes against enemies and civilians. I wanted to know if she'd done anything more on this. The university had threatened her tenure track; their

materials lab had a big contract up for renewal with DOD that year.)

In addition to a tipline advertised throughout the ship, consent training featuring Bennett-Fog's decision-theoretic modules and what I could manage to articulate of some of Halation's principles, and a fast-track court-martial system, I had decided to answer Beek's objection by combining my tasks and made listening in on the whisper network the first mission of Rho Aias.

Beneath the rich variety of colours dominated by not the blue of gunpowder and India ink that revolutionized the Maori *moko* and then the global colonial sailors' tattoos, nor even the blue-green Nara ink of Japanese *irezumi*, but the ancient blue of woad, the dye of the Picts, strong and luminescent enough to pop out from skin that had seemed to have already been bathed in ink by the effects of colloidal silver. The slate-coloured avatar-skin made his ethnicity seem to fluctuate across his features, although the shock of high-contrast red hair, and his name was a fiction. A clone of Azoth's unreleased legal replacement for the Internet Archive, with an AI-powered navigator that made it feel like a regular search engine found the surname was Hungarian, and the tattoos were actually inspired by fan-

ciful Elizabethan reconstructions of the ancient Scottish tribes in question, with their curling, fanning blue thistles and strangely human beasts' heads at the joints. One original elaboration was his dick, twined around by a double helix of white and black hairs descending from the beard of a grimacing monster and ending in snake heads sinking their fangs into the glans.

I had a Japanese sword laid across my desk that Waldo Beek had given the day of the launch. I sadly knew enough Waldo Beek lore to know how embarrassing a gift it was; to know it was from World War II; to know there were dozens more where it came from; to know it was good quality for reasons he didn't understand and at some point it had been sullied by the attention of hundreds of suburban dads listening to him pretend to explain them. I hadn't taken it out of the bottom shelf of my office closet until now.

"First things first. We are five hundred light years from any semblance of terrestrial order, any civilian laws or tribunals, you've already seen the guns on you" - two bodyguards selected by Beek and one member of Rho Aias. "This has nothing to do with any conclusion we reach, but I personally didn't consent to talk with that thing dangling

in your face, and you don't have the right to leave the conversation. So that means" - I hoped Halation would keep my voice steady but she almost tripped me up here - "either I cut it off or you put something on."

The Rho Aias representative, a graphite-grey-haired, droopy-eyed, prognathous ex-Academi who had refused an unspecified mission in Yemen, held out the standard set of Azoth pyjamas everyone still wore off duty.

To make the unstated meta-point extremely clear, I had my own tits out under my jacket, which was fun.

Hadak put the pants on and left his jacket open, which I hoped was fine. Halation's discomfort inside me was an ocean of static rising up to my ears - they had blown up intercepting ships, transmitted information that had wiped out cities, but this kind of domination ritual, not to mention the knot of feelings and memories about sex and gender and violence churning in my gut, was new to them.

"My comrades and I have unanimously agreed to request your permission as a new military order directly under your authority, the Sacred Band of Sol."

"Look, you can probably imagine I'm not the kind of lead-

er to care that much about uniform discipline. I care a lot about consent, and I'd rather you keep this to your own quarters or something. But then you have to bring some other stupid shit into it. I'm not dealing with a cult the second I land on another planet."

His facial muscles didn't move any more than they had to physically to speak. It was uncanny, like one of those old cartoons where a live actor's lips were superimposed onto a 2D face. "I'm not trying to start a cult either. A military order is, to me, first and foremost an erotic compact. And I *do* care about uniform discipline. As far as they go, I'm quite a fan of yours, although I've thought of a number of design tweaks I'd love your opinion on. But out here, we finally have a chance to start fresh. When we sent the Pioneer plaque out to the stars, we wanted to show whoever saw it humanity, raw and bare. Adam and Eve, in the Edenic state."

"We've already given them biological schematics in our data comp, not to mention DNA they should be able to simulate the entire genetic blueprint from. Besides, you're not exactly raw and bare yourself - do you wanna give them the idea humans are naturally covered with weird flower patterns?"

"And the Pioneer Plaque would have given them the idea that men are naturally short-haired and shaven. But that's not the point. There's no way their simulation is building the whole thing out - all the beautiful and ugly things a drawing like that erases because we've been covering them for so long. The ways we make love and war, the ways our bodies from head to toe are *built* for it. The way we *hunt* - that's part of why we're here, isn't it? According to the briefings you gave us half of these planets haven't had *predation* in thousands of years, some never did in the first place" - now he was starting to grin, and to make clear I already knew this, I put my hand on the sword hilt again.

"Cult that thinks it's the only thing that's not a cult, like every cult. Do you have anything concrete to offer me here, or does Waldo Beek just take this stuff seriously because he's an idiot?"

"You said it yourself. You're five hundred light years from any semblance of terrestrial order, any civilian laws or tribunals, and surrounded by people who are opposed to you. You can't actually guarantee they can't get in contact with an alien to continue your war their way if you die. You can't just depend on formal command. And that *bitch* who works with you" - he laughed, airily and without spite

- "she might think she's the only person in the world who understands what that looks like in the abstract, and she might be right, but she doesn't know it in the *flesh*."

My face flushed with unexpected defensiveness towards Caroline Bennett-Fog (how much of the male soldiers' resentment against *that bitch* who made them do weird tests and read dense scientific papers had he marshalled into this stunt, anyway?) and I might have given it away if Halation hadn't been managing my face.

(They were a roil of emotions too, but the fine control they managed to maintain of a body they weren't even familiar with felt akin with the control they maintained of their own mental activity, and I wasn't sure how much was species, how much cultural, and how much hard-won by centuries of loneliness.)

"This is a weird way to advertise yourself for the hypothetical position based on exceptional personal loyalty, I have to say." I slid the sword in and out of the white leather sheath, admiring how the light tilted down it. "Unless you're threatening me, in which case."

I had told Jax in no uncertain terms *not* to tell him about Rho Aias - at least, not yet. Someone else powerful and

capable of commanding his own loyalty was exactly the kind of shortcut I didn't want to take. Over the journey I'd approved three candidates Jax had selected from the locker rooms and mess halls, and eight more they'd selected themselves (we called these the second degree). Of twelve Rho Aias members to date, one of the second degree, a former Gangster Disciple who had been taking contracts in Kurdistan for the last fifteen years, had joined the nude delegation.

A sick part of me couldn't look at this guy without imagining him ripping Waldo Beek's head off with his bare hands and fucking his emptied spinal cavity (feeling a satisfied warmth rising from my own solar plexus). At the same time, my own negotiating position was built on the assumption that would never happen; that Waldo Beek wouldn't have let this guy on if he was genuinely worried about losing control of him, and also thought I was safer. Of course, the straightforward assumption was that Beek was using *him* to threaten *me*.

He laughed, this time with genuine, disarming joy. "See, you're still wearing all these assumptions about me, about humans in a natural state! What I meant was, if you give these men - and women - permission to be what they

are, instead of holding up Beek's charade of Earth order, they'll be personally grateful to you. It's free loyalty - not through me at all."

"Well see I was already thinking of that, and you're just making things messier. Look, as you guessed it, I'm not the uniform type." Remembering dropping half an hour of anthropological obsession with their actual impact on combat effectiveness and social structure that silenced the table at a barstool argument between anarchists and Leninists, Delilah among the latter. "I love Mai's designs, and it's better than half these idiots running around wearing MAGA hats and getting into fights over soccer jerseys. But mostly I didn't want to sink a ton of effort into convincing anyone and everyone about that, when I had way more important things to convince them. The aliens don't seem to care - the Weirs and the Ahasurunu are all technically naked, and nothing in our data packets so far suggests a comparable taboo in any of the cultures we're likely to encounter unless we go looking for them. Around base, what humans care about is what matters. But since you've given me an excuse, I was thinking let's say on EV missions, units can decide their own uniform regulations, since they'll be the ones exposed to whatever climate we couldn't anticipate. That would be a unanimous consensus

of the unit, not a command decision. You wouldn't get a new authority out of it and you certainly won't get a military order or whatever, Jesus Christ."

"About the Weirs and the Ahasurunu - that's actually kind of unsettling, isn't it?"

He tilted his head and pulled his mouth in a way that was actually kind of unsettling. "What is?" I squinted back at him.

"That none of them have a taboo about it. That none of these planets walked out of Eden! None of them ate the fruit and were shamed by their God!"

"Yeah, I wouldn't expect aliens to have a Judeo-Christian origin myth, what's your point?"

"But do you think that myth is the real reason we have that taboo? Why would someone go to all the trouble to invent something so arbitrary? Which would mean that somewhere, someone, ate the fruit."

"Well, I don't know if this has to do with what you mean... but an important person to me always called Earth a silent planet."

"Hmmm. I think you know what that really means, considering what you've been so on edge about since the beginning. Do you think when we're done, the rest of the galaxy will wear clothes, and we will be the naked overlords, like the dawn?"

"Just for whatever mind game you're still trying to pull, literally everyone except you gets to go full buck naked. You personally are under orders to keep at least one article of clothing on at all times. You play by whatever bullshit evo psych logic you're trying to project on me." I picked up the sword and pointed it lazily. "Yeah, that means end of meeting."

He kept his eyes swivelled on me as he turned. "I was just kidding about the Sacred Band. I may have been trying to see how you'd react, but I'm actually more loyal than the other people I'm sure keep doing things like that right now - I only did it out of curiosity, not because I want anything. In fact, you can trust me in what's coming, whether you want to or not. Tell Waldo I said hi. If you want, you can tell him I told you that."

Fingal Hadak laughed and left. I glanced around at my security, gauging their reaction. They just looked at me sympathetically like I'd been having an awkward interac-

tion with a homeless person. And all I was thinking was, I*'ll take the next person who doesn't try to do anything like this. They could be anyone.*

I stepped through the surface of the vehicle, shimmering like a soap bubble except in colours the basic thin film interference we had on Earth could never make - another semi-permeable membrane. The atmosphere outside was only comfortably warm but more humid than anywhere on Earth, like a sauna that didn't make you sweat. I didn't mind it categorically - there was also a sort of diaphanous wing-pack, anchoring painlessly and without visible lesions under skin, I could wear to drift safely through the gas without any support - but the air-conditioned cool of the ship on the other side, albeit slightly more misty, was a relief.

It is *thin film interference, though*, Halation informed me - *the different layers of the semi-permeable membrane are chemically tinted, so we can give any one of these a bubbles a subtly different palette. There are a few popular ones, but we're still coming up with unique ones, like we did for yours.*

The "Leona" palette, which apparently Halation had been carefully picking out for me, was heavy on pale purple, deep magenta and clouds of dazzling reflective white.

Halation, of course, didn't stay inside me when we went EV in their own native habitat. Well, they had the first time I went, just to experience it from my perspective - not just to hear my thoughts, but feel the physical vertigo. They'd already gone out on their own, first thing when we'd landed, and not come back for over eight hours.

They were anchored in the bubble ahead of me. Caroline Bennett-Fog was sitting with her hands on her knees pulled up to her chest in the bubble behind me. The vehicle was a series of connected "bubbles" with the last containing four rotating discs covered in layered, hypermobile cilia that pushed the gas currents out through its own vibrating membrane behind it. (I had seen vehicles composed of any number from one to over a dozen.) Even more layers of the membranes, inside, were a medium for the Weirs' neural rhizome. This meant Weirs could "talk" between bubbles in their standard forms, as they could through the grooves and channels in a shared reef - the form of communication from which their unusually broad ability to symbiose with other lifeforms had evolved. (The bandwidth in a shared medium like this was less like the mind sharing we had and more like talking, albeit with spontaneously perceived context.)

More surprising than that, their shape had changed.

Even the "natural" shape of Weirs, as I'd found out shortly on arrival, wasn't uniform. As a complex mesh of autonomous strands with interfacing, redundant organelles, variability was inevitable, though they tended to be conservative - though there were "artists" who reshaped themselves constantly, Weirs in the natural state were more like a plant than an animal and didn't feel the need to *move* for long periods in a satisfying habitat. The shape I'd seen on all the Weirs in my first vision, and in most of Halation's memories to the point I hadn't even thought to press closer on it, was somewhere between a "uniform" for their project and an "adaptation" to the specific reef they were anchored on.

Halation's new form, on the other hand, was completely original. *I adopted it*, she began (this time, I startled, the "she" was *her* idea, transmitted in the cognitive metadata), *as a representative of humanity. Even if I'm employing you in a military setting, the role of an initiator of first contact is its own and eclipses my previous roles, my previous selves.* Was that why "she" was adopting a human gender identity?

The new body shape, however, was not itself humanoid. If anything it took inspiration from our ship, though sharper

and more elongated, like a tuning fork.

We don't caricature species we symbiose with in our own forms. It's considered rude.

0:00

Awright, this is Ajax "Jax" Lillywhite, AKA Da Prince of Terra, because I'm her *brother and don't you forget it, bringing you the LOGS. I am about to dump a big fat log and you are all going to love it, just lick it all up. Prince of Terra more like DUKE of taking a huge LOG. And this isn't even the unofficial log yet. I'm with 18th squadron "Big Dogs" and this is our first expedition outside the Lung. Three new gaps in the chamber opened during the last round of fungal bombings, and we will be exploring the nearest one, designated B7. This sticky blue-green stuff is a slime mold (close enough) which the Weirs have been using to map the caves and tunnels surrounding the Lung by transmitting electric signals through it. But without nutrients it'll harden into a dry caulk in - I'm not using that standard time unit shit, sorry - three Lung-days. And it's from off-planet so there's nothing it naturally feeds on here. So hopefully as we get this out into the new openings they haven't mapped, we'll also run into some of the mold they've already laid down and give it some of these nutrient packets so it can keep growing and mapping further. And we're also looking for signs of who's*

been bombing us in the first place, and kicking their asses if we find them. Although Leona said to check first that they actually know what side we're on before doing that. We have a thingy here with recordings of some very basic phrases in their language that we can toggle through. It's really high and buzzy and hurts my ears so I hope we don't have to.

I watched the clouds in a different way than I was used to at home. It wasn't the Catatumbo Basin, but Montana was a great place to experience Earth's atmosphere, particularly in its stark contrast between a crystalline, depthless blue that seemed more like the border of world than part of it and sprawling, sharp-edged, dramatically shaded collapsing palaces of white. We had mist sometimes when a rainy morning got up close, but you could barely see the trees at the edge of the field through it, let alone the shape of other clouds, behind clouds, behind clouds, colours behind colours, colours translated through colours until you couldn't know the first or the last. Contours shifting around and through you.

And the "sun" that shone through them was a pulsing plasma lamp, irregular as a heart, white-brilliant but veined with pink and blue filaments across its surface and up through the glowing membranes between each of

the atmospheres in which it was embedded, transmitting warmth and energy, one thick artery running all the way up to the floating stone brain projecting the Asymmetry Field through the tunnel. I got close enough to see it hundreds of metres below, a momentary gap in the thickest cloud revealing it as more than a bright blur, as we crossed over to the Ahasurunu atmosphere, through a portal of puckered blue translucent gel. Weirs preferred vehicles for travelling in open atmosphere; the Ahasurunu, native floaters, a cluster of them waiting for us at the portal, didn't.

They greeted us.

Halation through the vehicle translating for me, I sang back: *"Take me to your leader."*

00:30

This stuff is supposed to advance at a metre per twenty seconds - so at a normal march, even on uneven terrain, we'd be pausing and waiting for it to catch up with us - but the first stretch of this was such a narrow, uncomfortable crawl we're now scrambling to catch up with it. And now almost as soon as we have headroom to stand up (and it's another big bubble, with all kinds of tiny holes in the floor that make it feel like it's gonna fall apart under us, DO NOT come out here if you have

trypophobia man) we've hit our first crossroads. The mold just splits and keeps moving at the same pace in every direction, just filling in these little grooves in the rock, although it somehow knows to follow just the relatively large tunnels and not flatten out the whole thing. And it's kind of hot and a little damp but not in the way I'd expect a cave on Earth to be - not slimy or slick. I still feel self-conscious but Specialist Hadak might not have had the wrong idea about clothes out here; it feels nice on bare skin and kind of icky on a uniform. Supposedly the disaster fucked up this planet's water cycle so that the oceans all drained into the crust and now most of it's very dry near the surface and completely submerged farther down but there's these partly natural, partly artificial pressure currents that suck water through the upper crust, plus heated vents which is what we're on, feeding the Lung's atmospheres. Jesus Christ. Leona you should be here explaining this shit, but you're right, I did enjoy it too when we were kids. I even tried doing some wikis but my attention would ramble all over the place, you know how it is. There's little things in here, like little round copper coloured squishy puffballs with curly flaky stuff peeling off them like whatever the fuck that stuff is that's all over anything microscopic in a photograph, sticking to the rocks. I guess they just absorb heat and moisture? The database says they shouldn't be explosive, which is good because they're absolutely everywhere. Glad we're not crawling any more so we

can just step on them. Specialist Hadak says they feel really good on your bare feet too. They just spring back as if nothing happened.

The Ahasurunu don't look mobile enough to perform many of the manual tasks of a complex civilization. Our starfish have flexible tentacles, but the other three points of one's main body don't move much more than the two built into the flight disc. They have to move their whole bodies to do basically anything. It looks ridiculously inefficient. But I've never seen anything perform such complex movements in air so effortlessly. The flight disc is surrounded by a ring of another hundred or so jets which can all push out air from imperceptible whisper to mach speed completely independent of each other. The logic of the colour-wheel synthesizer, and the language itself to some extent, follows from this. No wonder this species built the most sensitive, adaptive intellectual system I've ever encountered; for the Ahasurunu, learning to move and learning to talk are like learning jazz.

Almost immediately inside, I could see the structure of their Playscape. It seems absurd to use that translation for what we would call a military R&D lab, whatever its peacemaking intentions; but when you see it it's also im-

probably apposite. The structure looks like nothing so much as the giant space-themed indoor playground my parents took Jax and I to once as a kid (at a pit stop on some road trip, can't remember where). Twisted, coloured tubes winding around each other, through scaffolds and into spheres and cylinders, sloping ramps and runways for vehicles, corkscrew antennae and coils.

We parked a short way into one of the tunnels, which was lined with vehicles (and immobile Weirs). The Ahasurunu held things by extending small, retractable, quite elegant and not at all dangerous-looking chitinous hooks from any of a hundred to a hundred fifty tiny openings along their five branches. Positioning themselves by smoothly rotating, one that had broken away from the group and floated up to me offered me a putty ovoid with a colour-wheel disc embedded in it. I held up the one I already had.

I had been practicing on it since our very first exchange of technology, and could now bang out any favourite song from Earth on it by myself (so many of Mai's, ones even I'd been surprised I knew by heart) but didn't actually speak Ahasurunu well enough (if I ever would) to use it for serious communication without Halation translating in my head. The device was, essentially, a synthesizer. Their

musical-verbal notation was based on a systematic analogy of colour to note even before they had understood the correspondence of the wave theories of light and sound, which had been significantly easier for them to discover, and the system was now standardized to a single elegant transformation of wavelength. Moving my finger around the colour wheel, I could speak in a squarewave softened to a fine-toothed comb of windy overtones.

No one here could understand human at all, so we could more or less talk freely.

They took us to Anashirana, who wasn't so much a leader as a "mission research strategist", pulling between different fields and areas of expertise at the Lung to allocate resources and efforts in alignment with a complex model of the universe, the war situation and the local environment. This also made them one of the people most naturally interested in and prepared to communicate with an uncontacted species. Their original specialization was something that sounded pretty relatable to me as a former anthropologist. They turned lazily in the light a translucent dome, across which various abstract-looking data visualizations responded to subtle movements, at the top of a long thoroughfare vault, the personal space loosely demarcated by

curtains hanging down, and a personalized blend of gases hanging between them, in our fungally adapted body a heady-sweet scent.

2:30

I'm glad we're not splitting up not just because we've all seen horror movies but because if we did it every time, there'd be like one of us left following any given path by now. When I'm not looking at Specialist Hadak's gravitational compass thing I have no idea what direction we're going, I'm trying to guess every time I look and more than half the time I'm wrong. The tack we've been taking has been to stay as level as possible, keep going as far out as we can, and stay as straight as we can right-to-left. There's less of the little round things whenever we're in a narrower and dryer area, although I think we almost hit one water-vein. There are some really weird colours in the rock too, streaks of shiny purple and little platinum stars. I keep expecting it to be pale and grainy like pumice or sandstone or something this porous would be on Earth but it looks like it came out of a volcano or something. Wherever there's bits and pieces of it they're big sharp-edged chunks. It's really freaky because it looks and feels like it should be really solid and it's not. I'm still carrying around a bit of the wall I pulled off in my hand. It's just the right size that would be really cool

to whittle into a knife or something.

It looked like we had just about caught up with the mold, and then we hit a dead end where it's escaped into a tiny chimney going straight up, barely big enough for one person at a time. The dead end looks like a cave-in and we're debating Private Bosil's proposal of using our own explosives. I thought we weren't supposed to be using any explosives in here unless it's a matter of survival, not even the microcharges, because we don't understand the rock well enough, but Bosil says this cave-in looks more deliberate (it is more regular) than the others and might be blocking off where the people who opened this new vein went. (I'm still the only one saying "people".) We have the measuring vibrators, so it should be OK, right? We gotta stop calling them vibrators. What do they call the Dune thingies again.

"The situation is, right now, we have the advantage of military technologies that maybe no one else in the galaxy has developed. We also have some physical advantages as a highly specialized pursuit predator, but that varies by location and opponent species. That advantage has a limited window. We've taken some precautions to prolong it - for instance, our guns all contain a remote-controlled acid cartridge, connected not only to our operators' ra-

dio comms but to a hidden transmitter pegged to their pulse. We've also been working on a doctrine of rapid engagements preferring either retreat or hegemony over any potential conflict of attrition, unless we have substantial reasons to believe we would win it, which we might in a lot of cases. But eventually, someone will find a way to reverse engineer everything we throw at them. We need to decide what strategic objectives will create the most decisive possible advantage within this window. Let's ignore any upper bounds on scale at first - we can correct down as we get a clearer sense of what resources we'd need for what."

And you came to the nearest peace-seeking research station for this.

"Well, closest base period, as far as we're aware. But yeah, this is also part of strategic objectives. If there are any that would particularly secure the peace-making factions within the anti-Adipose alliance -"

"Unless, of course, the peace would only be buying time until the conflict breaks out again, by which point we might be essentially useless," Bennett-Fog interrupted. "On Earth we'd assume suppressing an emerging technology requires absolute hegemony, but Leona-Halation tells me you have multiple machine superintelligences

that haven't destroyed each other. And they're on different sides of this war... what's the likelihood that goes hot, and should that be our primary concern? How much do we risk upsetting that?"

It's already gone hot. Several network blocks have been destroyed, including this planet's.

"No but I mean like. How smart are these network blocks exactly? Even you guys can break things we think are laws of physics. None of the reasons she gives me that you haven't weaponized more of it, let alone them, make sense to me... What does it take for them to do more than hack each other? Is that why this Adipose is such a big deal for everyone?"

Oh. Oh I see... yes, that's how a more militarized species would think of it. I thought you might... You know, you might have come to the exact right Playscape. The history of this planet, and our own research, have more to say your questions than you'd be able to find in many other places... Our briefings say you were on the brink of a geoengineering catastrophe yourselves when we found you, don't they?

Bennett-Fog stiffened, reddened like an elementary schooler reminded of a public tantrum. "Sort of. Our lead-

ership is just barely catching up to our science on these things on Earth, but we can assure you the leadership of this mission is independent and cutting edge" -

The Adipose reminds people of a period when things like that were a lot more common than they are now. About three billion years ago, The network blocks warned us, if anything. That's why they were able to step in so quickly on this planet. But first, let's get a bit more specific about computational life. The network blocks we're aware of are the tip of the iceberg of computational life, and they've been around billions of years longer than anything else. Do you know what the rest of the iceberg is?

Halation reminded me, and I didn't say anything, watching Bennett-Fog's face.

Solipsists. Your own model of the universe has already encountered them as Dark Matter. When you're a network, the best way to protect yourself is to hide yourself from the electromagnetic spectrum altogether. Asymmetry makes this possible - and the Solipsists probably have far more perfect Asymmetry than we do. Apart from gravity, which is the one fundamental force field no one's figured out how to compute in, no one can see them and they can't see anyone else. If they collide their Asymmetry Fields just route them around each other. Huge swaths of the matter in the universe has been cloaked in this way - prob-

ably stored in weird states that are harder to stumble across, too - and is probably being used as computational substrate, or maybe even for physical construction, by minds older and more powerful than anything we can imagine. And they just… don't bother us or each other. Everything they value is in their own computations, and however big they are they got big enough to do enough of it and switch priority to keeping it safe. The ones we know are the absolute most sociable, to the point that they value radically other forms of life in themselves. Incidentally, have you sent Earth's coordinates to the Recorder yet?

3:00

Let it be known, and all responsibility taken individually and all consequences accepted in advance, that it was Specialist Hadak's decision to go through the cave-in. The microcharges are incredible. Hadak didn't even stand back, he wanted to feel it on his skin, and then we all did because it's just like getting hit with a hair dryer. All of us got to place one. Privates Lloyd, Ishag, Guo and Haidar have taken off their uniform tops and not gonna lie I kinda want to myself, it's very nice and toasty in here, but it may not be in keeping with the dignity of the keeper of the LOGS.

And let it be known that, in my opinion, he definitely chose the right path. This is totally different, by far the biggest space

we've been in. Not as big as the Lung, but the last half hour we've just been directly descending one side of it. We estimated with the amplified flashlights it's about eight by three clicks, longest by shortest distance across. The amplified flashlights also caught something moving, four clicks away, on the uppermost wall. Pretty sure they noticed we saw them too. There haven't been any more signs of anything. The mold has already made its way in, we just caught up with it. But it doesn't look like the channel through which the mold got here would be viable to a human at all, so probably all the big enough openings were blocked off just like hours. I'm not entirely sure how they would have done that, seems like it would take forever, unless the fungus itself tapered off with some kind of microcharges at the ends? Bosil's read the most of the database of anyone and thinks there are a few that could do that but there's like fucking fifty and it keeps repeating that's only the known species so don't ask me. But in either case it means we haven't seen anywhere we could be ambushed from yet, and have a four-man formation sweeping our surroundings with the flashlight beams (both the narrow and broad ones) and our gun sights with them. Private Zhurong calculated the whole formation on the spot, and he's writing it up so you can pass it along to other units or for anyone to improve on. I feel like I'm in a D&D party. We've hit the bottom and I think we're just going to ignore the mold for a bit, march full speed across until we get to the estimated

distance the bogeys were at, and then we'll have to climb and who knows how long that will take. We're staying quiet, doing that bagua step which is fun, I know they use sonar or whatever, but Specialist Hadak's having the time of his life. I can tell by the way his back moves when it's in the flashlight. The tattoos look like they're having a campfire party. Otherwise it's pitch black in here.

Halation blurted out through my mouth, embarrassed: "No! But you have a direct line here, don't you?"

Yes, I suppose you came to the right place.

"What, you can't just go around giving Earth's coordinates to - what even *is* this" - If this had been a Miyazaki movie Bennett-Fog's hair would have been flaring out.

An old and powerful computational lifeform, causally cloaked unless you have a key for the self-updating code that allows them to receive spatiotemporally scrambled communications. They have made a mission of recording and preserving a sample of the "pattern" of every ecosystem producing self-reflexive systems.

"'Pattern'?"

We were now in the terrain of semantics even I would be taking months or years with. Halation herself thought this was a bit above her pay grade, as the Recorder's concept of "*pattern*" was deeply embedded in its own private language and translated differently by the countless civilizations that had interacted with it. Thread; ceiling; song; reflection; horizon; value; it occurred to me that it might even converge closely with the subject of concern Bennett-Fog insisted on describing in the dry terms of "utility-function". (Such dry terms also existed in many of the alien contexts Halation knew, but those wouldn't translate at all.)

When I used her preferred term, however, Bennett-Fog nodded, and kept nodding when I clarified I didn't think it was quite the same; the same or not, she knew it would pop up somewhere, and accepting it as an imperfect translation was preferable to treating it as dark matter bending the conversation from somewhere outside.

"Do Patterns change?" she asked, leaning into me while staring at our and I desperately scribbled a translation. "Or, I mean... does the Recorder record a Pattern that's known to be unchangeable, or does it just record the Pattern as it appears at a particular point in the species' his-

tory? If a Pattern is incompatible with others, what does it...?"

The Recorder has been known to return to systems it has recorded once to re-record them, if there are no new ones to attend to. They generally only do this after millennia of development. Orchid has been visited three times.

"How does it decide the bounds of a... system? Because like, Earth has a lot of cultures, that are actively in conflict with each other, not to mention species..." This was starting to tap into my nerd-brain - I was so glad I had done my undergrad in anthropology. (There was a fantasy I returned to over and over in my bunk that I had left the military stuff to someone else and joined the expedition purely as an anthropological attaché... a nagging doubt that somehow I could have done more good that way, what if I didn't have time to interpret something carefully enough and made a wrong decision I could have informed someone else about...)

Planet. It swallows them.

"Swallows?!" Bennett-Fog reeled back.

The procedure should take no longer than 25 tenth-exponent

standard temporal units (about thirty-six hours). *The planet will be bombarded with an Asymmetric radiation that does not transfer information to other matter, and the light and heat it normally receives will be filtered through the Recorder's outer membrane. But it will be visible, so you should instruct your planet to prepare.*

The only information Halation could exchange with me was the sense of everything overlaid with a filter of a colour I couldn't name, and that was apparently an approximation based on a dozen millennia of slowly degrading neural transmission.

"And is there any way to... delay it? Or can we just wait to contact them? There are some important things that could change on Earth, very soon, depending on how we manage..."

That's exactly why the Recorder would want a recording of Earth as close to pre-contact as possible, is my understanding.

"While we're talking about changing Patterns." My companion coughed. "If one of the Solipsists... changed its pattern for even a second, and just *woke up*..."

Everything lives at the mercy of improbabilities that dwarf it.

But the ones we know believe it would be contained quickly. A few of the network blocks have… speculative histories reconstructed from symmetrical models of their own algorithms that claim a state of general war between very powerful networks, including themselves, existed before what you call the Big Bang. That the Big Bang itself was the reality determined by the victory or compromise of the reality engineers. The believers of these projections are a powerful force against the Adipose - they believe it may be one of the technical capabilities that were systematically suppressed from memory when the universe was remade. The Meteorological position, however, is that the wills (I noticed their variation of the Meteorological term - which could be adjusted by mere notes in the Ahasurunu language to indicate doctrinal disagreements - was very close to the Recorder's "Pattern", but not quite the same) *of beings are too flexible to be reverse-engineered like that - their memory has already decayed enough that they don't* know *how old they are. So one of the reasons we're working here is to advance our comprehension of the Adipose and retain our influence over the coalition - against what in some cases I wouldn't hesitate to describe as fanatics.*

I nodded. A chilling memory crossed my chest of Mab explaining some Christian concepts my dad had always made fun of, yet deferred to, in a way that made them make a

horrible amount of sense, only to tear them apart... "Then that's something we could help with."

3:30

Spotted the bogeys again. Not necessarily the same ones. They're on the bottom with us now, a click away. They stood still when the light hit and Private Singh has been keeping a low and a high focus fixed on them while we rotate people keeping up Zhurong's formation. Zhurong's formation should also work really good for modelling the space, by the way, he's got Guo stuck to him jotting as many measurements down as fast as he possibly can. As long as we've had the light on them they've been advancing slowly but steadily towards us. Their marching speed is only about half ours, which would mean they're not the same ones because they couldn't have moved around the space that fast, except they can do that gliding thing right. It's a spooky silhouette, long and knotted and wavery, although it's still barely anything at this distance. Maybe this is what we look like if you've never seen us before. We at least know they're supposed to be there - they must be way more scared than we are, although I guess they're more used to the idea of an alien in the first place. Since they don't seem to mind that we know exactly where they are, we voted to give them the benefit of a doubt. Specialist Hadak is surprisingly democratic like that.

We've stopped and are waiting for either them or the mold to catch up with us, listening through the vocalizer database to see if we can tell the difference at least between the different tribe names (we're not supposed to use that word but everyone's saying it), recognize the two we're supposed to be allied here if we trust them. Specialist Hadak thinks he can hear their sonar. I believe him.

I always wanted to see stalactites and stalagmites and I still haven't seen any. There's plenty of water, which Bosil says means everything here must be too new for them to even form.

Bennett-Fog shifted. "What do we actually know about the Adipose? Can we falsify any of these theories?"

Anashirana whistled an ascent to their first note in a way that functioned as a tonally specific filler indicating reluctance, embarrassment. *The war began too early. Both supporting and opposing factions wanted to restrict the information. The supporters figured out how - for computational life, it's just an extremely powerful encryption and for organic life, it's encoded into an autonomous symbiotic protein structure that grafts itself to the lowest-level chemical encoding (for instance, your DNA) in a lifeform. From a species of large single-celled organisms that share ideas largely by direct physical exchange. The protein itself is quantum-encrypted so it's illeg-*

ible unless you execute it, in which case it will also prevent you from disseminating the information in another medium… We have, however, one of our most valuable assets so far, a contained node, in this very Playscape. A single node can be frozen in a very particular configuration of Asymmetry Fields in the brief window in which it is fully built on one end but not yet activated from the other. We got lucky and this one got stranded when its other end was taken out in an ambush and then forgotten for eleventh-exponent units.

"What can you do with it?"

Without another end to operate it, very little. We've been exposing it to various kinds of exotic and Asymmetric radiation to see if we can detect any irregularities in how it interacts which might give us a clue as to how the Adipose actually works. We've also moved objects and materials in and out of it that might interact in novel ways.

"My own research station," Halation spoke through me, *"was working a theory in which there might be a way to control a single node from the inside with a quantum computer, which would confirm some major predictions of the Recursive Entanglement Model."*

Well, we have a separate team working out how and whether

we can test that doctrinally. The emotion I somehow managed to parse was sheepishness, or maybe that was just my expectation from humans in situations like this - I genuinely couldn't tell.

"That's still an issue? The Greeting Doctrine as it applies to entanglement, 384 obviously applies here! It would just be a nonstandard reversible entanglement!" An unexpected heat was rising in my chest. When Halation was upset about Earth things it only ever felt heavy.

The reversibility is one of the very things you are attempting to test!

"That has precedent, we wouldn't know anything *about reversibility if it didn't -"*

I stopped Halation - it was my body and I had *no* way of knowing if I wanted to keep going with any of this. "How valuable would just *guarding* it be? Is there a timeframe in which you can expect any major progress?"

Guarding *it, more or less, would require securing this planet. It's the worst possible place to have it, so complex and unmappable there's no way to know you've controlled all the access routes except the very surface of your base. But the last planet*

we had it on was about to switch sides. The Synod can't get anyone out to this entire strand, they're the most overextended polity in the galaxy, so everyone knows they're expecting to lose us eventually, like all the research projects. For the Synod's priority with a new technology - don't translate that! it predates its instrumentalization by the networks, it's more like a new… ontology? - not to be research tells you how bad things are. (We shouldn't even have come to a doctrinal conclusion before doing some of this research!) But you don't know what the outcome of the research will be, what timeframe it will happen on. And right now everything needs plans with timeframes, because time is corpses.

"So one mission priority could be to get it off this planet," I nodded.

"Or simply," Bennett-Fog murmured from under her bangs beside me, "secure the planet."

My throat tightened. Bennett-Fog's exercises always had squirming undertones of this comfort with total power, things even Beek would blush at. We couldn't be escalating to full-scale colonialism, of a planet that looked designed to be the most clusterfucked colonial misadventure imaginable, already?

It wouldn't be as hard as you think. A targeted strike force we think was sent after us specifically, and that would be a small group, has already almost completely secured the surface with some sort of stratospheric bombing campaign. Anyway, an intermediary goal might be to secure a power source that would allow us to even make that decision. Right now, all the power we can possibly generate is dedicated to keeping these atmospheres and these Asymmetry Fields up and running. There's no way we could accumulate enough for an Inchworm Drive to get all this all the way to a safe planet. And this is a planet where, generally, energy sources are very small and very scattered. You'd need to either seize an awful lot of space and resources, or hijack something big they have or are working on. Their strike force, for instance, is somewhere in either the atmosphere or near Earth orbit, but since we lost the satellite network we haven't been able to get any sense of where it is. We don't know what kind of base it has, but it might have something.

3:45

Private Cheat finally composed a preliminary conversation sequence to follow the tribal passcode sounds in the index. They probably could have heard us the whole time, but we took the time to prepare, so we wouldn't just leave them hanging as soon as they introduced themselves. We haven't come up with a word

for human in this language yet - we'd just call ourselves Uncontacted Species. It was also planned for each of us to take turns with it. The vocalizer is so cool, it's like this little grey horn with vibrating foam on the inside and circuits woven through the outer shell that Weirs can interface with directly, but we just connect through the Clamp network to a procedurally generated UI on our phones. It's a shame the Clamps don't have enough bandwidth to do what the satellite network here did, which must have been a hell of a lot. As soon as they heard either of those they turned and started shuffling back. Man, I've never seen a group work like this, I would have loved group work in high school with these guys. People with so many talents who figure such different things out so fast and don't resent me for being slow either, I just get to do the logs.

But anyway as soon as we said it they stopped, huddled for three or four minutes, although I still couldn't hear anything. The vocalizer wasn't picking it up either and it picks up frequencies they can't hear, so they must have been using the lesser vocal organ or some other form of communication. Private Cheat says to remember they might not even be Towers themselves, although they're close enough I'm sure I can see the crests. Then they turned around and started marching straight at the same pace in the other direction. Do they not think we're dangerous or can they just not go faster than this? Specialist Hadak

says this is what we're here for - it's time to show them what a pursuit predator can do. The ground is still really uneven here, even though the longer narrower tunnels seem to be filled in, there's huge pits and ridges where larger chambers might have been just blasted out. We can see the way along one out to where they are now, we have to just march single file. We'll catch up to them in no time flat. We're not going to attack, just position ourselves so they can't just wander off without talking to us, and so they know we care about who's bombing this place. Long live the International Interstellar Expeditionary Force.

"Would this also apply to us?" Bennett-Fog's eyes were narrowed at me - or Halation in me. It wasn't a trap, we had assumed we'd be able to refuel here - we hadn't had a very solid basis for that, it was just the only place we could even get to on our own so we would have to refuel there - and we clearly still could -

Not in the same sense. You could probably stash up enough to get to Cataract without being changed by this place. The tone modifiers - I devoted all my energy to reading this time - smiling, only bitter in the sense of a good strong tea.

"The highest-impact strategies, if that's really our priority here, are probably closer to the centre of the conflict, with more resources we can leverage," Bennett-Fog began.

“We don’t want to leave you here,” Halation and I said in unison.

Bennett-Fog tugged on the shoulder of my jacket. “I swear to fuckblubber, Leona Lillywhite, if you start thinking like a civilian before we’ve even executed a mission” -

“And if you start thinking like a”- I giggled involuntarily imagining pulling a goofy insult from her vocabulary. “No, this doesn’t feel right. Both of these paths feel too obvious.” When I played full-scale wargames against her, those kinds of war-movie emotional values and the actual values I wanted to preserve against her and everyone else in this stupid army, in my whole stupid species, usually traded off *against* each other. Getting the highest-impact strategy in the shortest time was my priority, and it was *my* priority so that the disaster we had summoned wouldn’t have time to catch up with us -

“You also didn’t let me finish. I was going to say, on the other hand, capturing an uncapturable planet, or even just rescuing an unrescuable research station - those are the kinds of things that will demonstrate our value quickly. That will prove we can leverage those higher-impact resources, ones we might not be able to access otherwise.”

There - see. She wants to use a Waldo Beek hero story for propaganda. Saving space Benghazi. And it'll get us bogged down in space Libya, maybe even for long enough that they can get someone in touch with the bigger players themselves, or even the other side, or it'll just get us laid out by a roadside bomb somewhere, and all it takes is one of these desperate Weirs to replace us, and then...

Halation had been like another girl bleeding on the kerb. But I had seen people in asking for help to my face and refused them before. You couldn't do it as *little* as I did and never do it.

"Yeah. I think this will be a good demonstration mission. For the rest of the anti-Adipose, and for us, to gauge what we can and can't do. And will establish our research, peacemaking priority. But we'll have to establish its parameters more exactly."

I couldn't tell which of us was doing it - I don't think either of us wanted to know which of us was doing. I think we both wanted to pretend.

It made sense, on another level - we couldn't be cowards this early, when we hadn't even lost anything yet - because if we accepted that level of caution, we should never have

attempted what we were doing in the first place. We had already made dangerous choices, we had to prove we could *survive* them.

You will only be able to do that one step at a time. It isn't a demonstration. It's learning to fly. I translated as learning to walk.

We'd be learning to walk, literally, on crumbling ground.

5:00

I can't believe how fast this is all fucking happening. I mean we've been waiting for it for weeks, but fuck.

Should have been obvious, but they were leading us into a trap. As soon as we caught up to where they had been walking before, this huge sinkhole opened up beneath us, just crumbling into pieces into the dark the light won't tell us how far through a sort of spiderweb of that shiny platinum stuff, strong enough to hold us up. Cobweb - it's not geometric or pretty at all. Pvts Guo and Bosil were injured from falling on it. Specialist Hadak, Private Ishag, Private Zhurong, and surprisingly myself caught ourselves on it. Pvts Lloyd, Haidar, Singh and Cheat were caught by the half dozen of them climbing up through the web.

I'm glad I had the wireframe from the info packet to prepare me because these are by far the freakiest things we've seen so far, partly because they're just a little closer to stuff on Earth than all the gas giant guys, they look like animals not just abstract balloons floating around, no offence to gas giant guys. They're like twice as tall as you and skinny like stickbugs and have six legs and the vestigial one that bend like three ways, and those big accordion glider wings tucked under the four they use to climb, but it is still legs and torsos and heads. They're just weird enough that you look at every bit and see something you think you have a reference point for and then don't, you have a reference point for not having a reference point, but the closer you look the less you can pin it down. Like the head, flat and horizontal like a tropical fish, with the big vocal crest on the top and the little one on the bottom, and the big swivelling chameleon eyes on the sides and the tiny sucker mouth. But then you see how it moves, how it breathes… and there's something really different about how their joints look, like they're ball-jointed almost. Not to mention the almost translucency of the soft-keratin, seeing just barely the shadows of joints and organs like through a horn lampshade… Not that you see that much because they are wearing some kind of clothes, like stretchy copper-fibre wraps around their torso and limbs, although I can't tell if it's covering any sussy parts or just for keeping warm.

I hope nobody says they're gross. They're really, really cool.

The worst part is the hands, how much like impossibly long human hands they look, but with all those reversible joints, and soft until they inflate and harden like… I won't say it. They have some kind of needles tied to the tips that they numbed the guys they grabbed with, but not nearly as much as they thought, because after… well first Specialist Hadak dared a bunch of them to come after him. Three or four chased him as he swung around, taunting them in English like "pursuit predator and a tree dweller, bet you never seen that!" They're much faster climbing than walking, but slower at close quarters with so many of us around. They make these really cautious, jerky movements, like big grasshoppers. Anyway he let one catch him and then just started breaking its fingers, one by one.

I couldn't even tell if it was hurting at first. They broke so easy he looked surprised at it. He was practically tying one in a knot and that's when it started making a crazy noise with its big vocal crest that translates something like "offense" and they started spitting these whipping these blister-packs of some fluid at us from slings in the little vestigial hands sticking out of their butts. Which gave Private Zhurong his chance to shoot out one the thin strands of the scaffolding, and Cheat woke up and used the vocalizer to call for a Hold of Hostilities and a Preliminary

Apology. Some more shit happened in there but those were the basics I had my eyes open enough to follow. I think him recovering that fast scared them too, because they were just holding the guys and if they woke up, they could start breaking fingers too.

And then we just went through our planned conversation tree as if nothing had happened. I don't think either side would have been able to think of anything else. They say they don't have a side on the Adipose, they followed the people who've been setting those fungus charges up a water vein, who are like some developers or something, and then left them stranded when they realized this tower was inhabited? There's more to it we don't have enough diction in the vocalizer to interpret, there was something with "Offworlder", so it might not be entirely coincidence still. As planned, we gave them the walkie-talkie with the Clamp network, but they recognized the connection so you're not gonna be able to spy through it. They recorded an identifier to give to the tribes on our side, and they want to do some kind of "restitution exchange" with us, which I think is actually going to be heavier on their side since Ishag got an acid packet right in the eye and Guo's spine might be broken and Lloyd had some kind of allergic reaction to whatever they injected him with. They gave us some sacks of medicines but no way in hell we're trying any until we get back. (We're also gonna bring back some of those little puffball things, to see if we

can molecular substitute them into anything edible.) We found a nice tight sheltered indent to hide in and have been tending to the wounded and processing what just happened for almost an hour. A couple guys - I won't say who! - are handling it worse than others. I mean I vomited a couple times but I'm good. We keep dragging out the vote but everyone knows we're gonna go straight back. But Specialist Hadak wants everyone to know he'd follow our slime mold around here all on his own for the rest of the assignment if we'd let him. If you send somebody out tomorrow to see where it went, please put him as Specialist and me on the mother fucking LOGS.

We took a brief look at the Adipose node, but there wasn't much to look at. What you could see was the smaller and smaller overlaps of Asymmetry Fields over it, crystal shields of colour crossing each other. Inside them was just space. Thin tracks were laid out towards the centre of empty spherical cobalt chamber to introduce test objects.

I suspect the fears your friend has regarding computational life are the ones they themselves have with regards to the Adipose, and the reframing makes me feel somewhat provincial, they explained as they led us through a glossy capillary to I had given up trying to follow where. *You have to understand, I've never been* pro-*Adipose, in the sense of thinking we need*

it for anything, that it can't just be something we sit on and research until maybe billions of years from now when they think we'll need it. But the problem with researching the Adipose is it brings up debates in Meteorology we've wanted to keep closed for a long time. Closed because they leave places like this planet behind. Much stranger than this planet. The Towers just wanted to exploit resources for their preexisting preferences like your planet with its… carbon? But with Meteorology, since we try to interact with matter as if it was an end in itself. So whenever we change things, we let them change us, change what we want. And what we want and don't want can get much bigger. There's an entire nebula out there, Halasuzerina or Sandpit to the Weirs, which is networked like an Asymmetry Field with nothing but minimal iterated self-reference algorithms - every spatial unit of it is self-conscious - because enough of us at one time came to believe Mira's description of will required that of all matter. The testimony of Halasuzerina themself, at least, put that heresy to rest. Myself, as a historian of reality engineering before I was enlisted as a scientist - I've been trying to procure a piece of Halasuzerina to bring to the Node. My own suspicion is that the self-replicating algorithm used to transform them has something in common with the structure of the Adipose. No one's even looked at it closely in so long. If you ever get the chance…

But yes, they continued as they sang us through a grated entrance to a space of open atmosphere surrounded or at least demarcated by curving yellow ribs. *That's why the Synod was able to shift so quickly into not only having a stance but one in defense of which force could be invoked. Most of the galaxy avoids war most of the time by speaking, and retreating to themselves when they can't agree on something. But when you have to speak for things that can't… when you bear the weight of far more lives than yourself no matter what you do…*

Below the rounded platform onto which we had stepped, floating along the spine of the training ground -

A standard temporal unit fourteenth exponent ago, there were only this many people practicing these techniques on all of Orchid. Now they train in every city with a large Ahasurunu diaspora in the galaxy. Here, it started out a few and now it's almost everyone, as we wait for this place to fall on our heads any day and leave us nothing else…

- dozens of Ahasurunu spun, danced, arced, jagged, movements I couldn't even imagine following unless I pinned my eyes to a single point and watched it trace Gordian knots in space. Anywhere from four to twelve, sixteen, twenty? blades, hooked, serrated, curved, barbed, of a seemingly endless catalogue of materials, spun from the

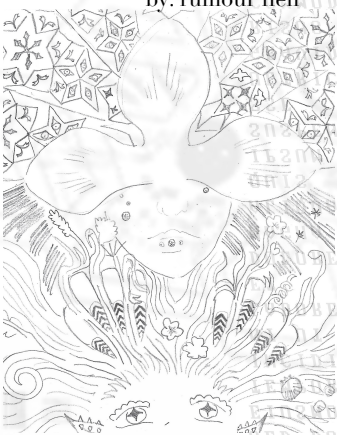
tiny grips on their limbs.

The next morning, after I finalized the mission we'd outlined in conversation and hit send on the briefing, the daily messengers from the Ahasurunu lobe of Lung would tell me Anashirana was dead.



SCARRED ZERUEL

by: rumour hell



Name: Orche

Blood type: o positive

Likes: illusive veils, pheroweave translations, ghost schemas

Dislikes: being alone

Seen with: Phassa

Name: Phassa

Blood type: a negative

Likes: sunshadow, the nodal soul, custom leafware

Dislikes: shallow talk, Field trips

Seen with: Orche

"... if the pathogenic organisms are there, it's unlikely you'll get them all off. What are you going to do, not eat?" - Patricia Griffin

Orche had said, *i give you your bones bereft the spit and gum of you, for those things are for the paper trees*. She'd said that to pass it on through Laeath's pheroweavings. An easy ask because she'd be away from it, not worried about it. For her it's time, a bit more wound down and this planar not one spiders brook easy, can wander at their leisure. Because eventually the web sticks with the residue of ground tread time and again. The line gunks up each

time, a little more every pass.

Still as Laeath ossifies into the permanence of the oraclehood she thinks, there's no right way to do this. She gathers the billows of her smokeskein through which she controls what she sees, how she sees it, how others see her. Her mission is to record the final moments of Morgan's Tender, at the end of its growth now fading to black. What makes an exile is they can't, in the end, nourish their Tenders. And that would happen, she thinks, without me. Without a Tender, the way to go is full of harm with my eyes not reaching them and when they're gone there goes Orche's prechrysalis. By this time the world of electric flora is in early disentegration. The light breaking through the vein linings, that held back the datastream encased, tinged a phosphor green and the bleed lines web across the sky.

Here where the canopy is tattered enough to see them. Crackling through the bramble, microlatticed up there, with the dying Tender straining to reach them. By now Morgan has passed the clean flame. With him gone the Tender has let the Frost in that she'd spun into foreign attack. Orcha Mutate hangs on with a desperate grip, but sure, she thinks, it's just winter, and winter is when Orche

wanted to change.

So as she pulls her smokeskein along its trails lap and spark against the Flora. Gleaning as clear a picture she can, through the smoke as it stabs. She's not a moment too soon, with the white bleach of the Frost coating the nanonodes and spreading through the datastream the way blood flows, carries sickness through it. Through her sight she sees the bleach but not the data itself; the spoolings, inner weavings of Orche are unknown to her.

Of course Laeath could say, I told you so, if it all looms out into something she doesn't want. But she thinks that isn't part of her role here, not as designated by the Gates. And the Gates have strict rules on not going too far, because the last thing the Coven wants is for a stronger power to care for any reason that they're around, scuttling through the Cosmere and knowing, getting close to, the strands thick with meaning.

It's gross, she thinks, and hates herself for it, but Orche had seen value in them, had let them deep into the tangle. Serving a planetconsciousness in its chrysalis was enough for the strains of thought the Gates bled into their cluster-

mind. For indice reasons it wouldn't be her part to watch what happened after.

When the Flora are iced over then she'll know. Even as the corruption spreads the oversweet musk of the Tender wanes beneath the still blotting of nothing, the musk going, the scent fading out, like berries passing ripe, souring, and all her pheroweavings are to capture the scent, strain it from the spreading nothing. So it can be sequenced for schema if needed. Without us so little would get done, she thinks, but she needs to think it. Or else and ever after would she feel the hatred, take it with her like her smokeskein back home, to the clustermind beyond the Gates. Where they all tumble over each other and pattern each othersothers' weavings, skip across them with needlethin legs, drawing here and spooling there. And before you are gated you are not even sequenced from the hive. When you come back you have a name and a face and you must wait for both to die.

The Tender's final cry is a harsh wind wailing, wavering, as if choking on its own sound. Tenders don't know they can die until they do. When they do they realize they're alone for it, alone and if this one knows her as witness they don't

care, it's their keeper that they want. He isn't coming back, she longs to tell it. It's just me and you now. For whatever I am, and you are.

When the Tender knows it can no longer keep going it gives up its ghost to the networked Sun, but other Tenders (the disentegration teaching all the nanonodes to give of themselves to the nothing beyond) wouldn't see it coming. And so Morgan's is the last lonely death.

With that in her memory she is tired. Her banks are swollen and bloat against their limits like bodies pressed against binding rope. Cutting grooves into the shape of it and she knows only when she is past the Gate will she be released of it. For now she holds it, and with weary eyes keeps the smokeskein dusken, the better to slip away, unknown and unknowing into the folds of the outer embrace, itself a cage the kindredKindred could never see. Slipping away where the lilacs are stalk through petal almost not bothered except for the chalk white that strains, in thin trickles and blemish where the trickles meet, running past each other, climbing from the neonic loam like wriggling worms, the kind of writhing she has a taste for, this far out into the black.



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

Last Time

Cammy, Morgan and Dear meet in EXILE and journey to the Chapel.

CW: altered reality, subjective ambiguity, subjective splitting, isolation, death, ambiguous body horror, surveillance, combat, game interface, gang warfare, subjective hijacking, body replacement

THE GARDEN

Phassa knits her lips. Her hair of braided grass is singed sickly white at the tips, and she knows it's because she's been here too long. Here where Orche has schema-based the décor on the Gardens of the Queen. This cleft of dark slab monoliths; she still sees them that way, has to for what scrying her proxima as Orche's symbiosis with the Flora requires of her. Bone tired she sees the gaunts where Orche sees the lush. Orche is keeping it from her.



How can Orche not expect jealousy? She fumes. For her all this beauty veiled, leaving her to wait around in a valley of death.

She'd found her own schema, one she'd kept from Orche; so far Orche hasn't asked about her sojourns through the Solitude. The wastes that span fathoms collect as residue any schemas old enough to go ghost. They fall like shooting stars, she thinks, if you could see them; but her Lavendry picks them up as best relics and at worst discards. She knows it by the symmetry: a psyche halo mod. Psyche halos have numbers; with this mod comes a name, a use, a function.

My use for now is by her side. Orche is gowned, her raiment flowing, and her black hair wreathed. She sits silent on the hivic throne, itself polished black the gleam of carapace. The fall of her hair twists and snakes slender arms a pale aquamarine, like foam rippling, cresting the sea. Like waves, the same pattern creasing her eyes. She's dyed them glade green and they glint severe through sleepy lids.

O breath, Orche says, her voice as if a well bubbling, overflowing, pouring over in *vivre*. Like a moody day breaking bright and clear and then you rinse and repeat. Until you are sure of nothing but the same pattern of mood in charge and release. So any warmth she shows is

She puts all her energy into both. *Back-onned with the breeze, my pollen mote.*

"Dead air," Phassa says, in her quiet voice, the one she wishes she could raise. She means by that, no breeze. Telling herself, too soon to lose your patience. Pace yourself. Orche laughs, sounding like glass scattered over felt, muffled, muted, fragile. The joy is all hers, somehow. Truth is Phassa finds that weird. *Though I'm stuck by her, the chain knots both ways. Fastened to me or fastened to her, both ways neither of us can leave each other.*

So who, she thinks, questions again, is Orche trying to impress? The blistered glass loam looks to her like Orche's embraced a river of death through her own castle. Her own solitude. *And fabbed over all this is the Flora skinning a lush over it that I can't see. Feel it, am blooded with it, but because it's me I'm not allowed to see it.*

If the world hides from one, she thinks, does it matter? If it goes on for all else and all else can see it, but unfair, she thinks, if it sees you besides. Like Orche does, her glade eyes, which are not floronic, Phassa thinking, but more strange water, hidden behind sleeping lids, and I don't trust them. Where she hides secrets behind feigned sleep.

Don't need breath, you come a-whispering. Sometimes the design cracks, falters; then some quirk spills from Orche like the Flora open petals to the networked

Sun. Phassa knows the quirks of her brood but in Orche they breach her whole front because the result of her is so counter to any truth she'd keep hidden, convince you she kept it hidden.

Of course well hidden. *Out there, did you sojourn far? Here and there are things worth keeping*. Her lips crook into a bare smirk. Phassa says, "Troves and troves of not much, Orche. You know how stingy the Theocrypha is. The best stuff stays closed-loop. If you have an age that's all that matters. Corkscrew a quick fix and then it'll never make it to any Field." Much less this one, she thinks. The one I'm still wandering. Because of the Chains which can't be, she thinks, even prefixed to our hearts any longer, but must now be buried deep and entwined past the taut sinew. Seamed so deep and strangling we will never shake them off.

All the bracekeepers with Oracles putting all their faith and prayer into them. As if all that warmth is no freeflowing thing but must be kept static, buried, crushed by loam into stillness. Then the noeonic loam is fertile. Orche would be so mad she wouldn't want to leave them anything at all.

She stands there, trying as always to see herself as Orche

sees her, and failing. BG'd not by the stark lithslabs so much like lumps of charred bone but by the lush painted over it. No gnarl or wither even but in green gone cobalt in the milky light that would radiate from all the Flora, tied as they are through markers to the digitalis pluming, like blood pouring from wound, from the black walls breached. Forever out there now.

Orche appraises her. *Still I sleep light musing, you know. What is and what isn't. What you're keeping from me.*

"If I kept nothing from you," Phassa says, her voice bright, "I'd myself be empty."

Paranoid, Orche says. *Mouths to feed.* She's right. All descends through her to the Flora, grief and joy both. If the Flora are grieved, Phassa thinks, they don't show it. Keep it secret, to fester the rot at the pits, spreading just when subsumed.

The Flora have shelf life, she tells herself, letting it spill through her. In the final communion swallowed. Then I'll have used up any point for being here.

So even as she breaks it down for Orche, the Flora her eyes

for every stat, tuned as the leafware is to every presence passing and still. She reports her side, but, she thinks, Orche has the Gates. She has her own eyes, crawling, scuttling as hands off as Neutral Lotus forces them to be. Then she says it because it's on her mind.

"Every time you summon me it's to tell you something the spiders could tell you. You know what they're doing, right? The framework keeps them safe. It's for them, not you. Not even the Kindred."

Inside she knows. Orche lives to listen to anyone at all. That's the absent secret waiting for someone to never find. The slabs are frigid to the touch, streaming a cold burn through the weavings of her skin that is the digitalis itself woven over not even grub. As the cold seeps through the weaves, the motes passing it through, she pictures her heart stilled, crimson sinew stiffened, all in her ceasing movement. The heart she's never had. She pulls her hand back. As she does Orche rolls her eyes. *Delicious*, she says. *They keep me looped.*

If I could tell her, Phassa thinks, that we make promises for ourselves first, that we like the scene if we stay true to them, the whole way. Then she'd know. She'd know and it'd all be over. "That all you need?"

Orche's smle is soft, breezing from the crook of slight lips. *I need you forever*. Orche, all alone, waiting for her servant, the only one talking to her. The moment you arrive and the moment you leave. The two moments that matter most to her. So Phassa seeds the schema with sapspit, working on it beneath the veil of the lush. Seals it with a whispered kiss, as Orche tells her how pretty the Gardens are; you must die to see them, but of course you can never die.



It tested Exiles because it was supposed to. Morgan put that together from fragments of thought drawn one at a time from the Exiles dotting the room. Had to splice it together, some of them, he finds, Empdruids, and so able to spread the thought around, diffuse it into tiny stress points, less to deal with on a single level. More searching to find out what they mean. Here with no one he knows.

The chamber is grey and dry like the inside of a cocoon. In some places stitched together that he can make out with his grubsight, here and there but not everywhere. In some cases, lost behind opaque flat smoothness that reminds him of the Lustre. How it had felt wrapped around him, saying things he tried to figure out, spoke in prosaia while he'd wanted to know that Dear was still with him. Now he isn't, and Morgan is with those like him, only here because they can't be trusted.

Where they are which is nowhere near the Lustre, the clean flame that had screened them by charting a path of deceit with its messages. And many like him, grubs who have left their bodies somewhere behind the paper trees. Those which Mutate had first spread from the spores of. Their bodies husk-eyed and staring.

He thinks of his own face in sullen shadow with his weavings faded, greeting the next Exile. His geneweaves faded and torn. Faded into the growing dusk, the corrosion of the Love Chains spreading, tethers to final fates reaching. When they were in danger his Oracle had said it was a big deal. But that was a ruse, to follow the lines that bound him, in the end, to this collective of Exiles.

He's learned to find the Empdruids via the feints and shudders of the grub subreflex, that guides the sweep of sight, easy to fall into and mark once he remembered the scent of honeydew. An inward bend of palm shuffling his grubsight away, a shaking of shoulders his exhumed Skein reads with the scent infused and follows with wanting to the conduit Exiles. The scent spreading through from the trigger points of the grub's chakral control, flush across the inner skin that drags with it weary the exoshell. As he finds them the other Exiles note what he's doing and give them space, the Empdruids with their sockets falling away, the nothing in them falling away.

So he can reach bits and pieces of where they are, as the Sigilseers strain for it, sift it from the time and space and matter the chamber now contains.

Not without effort. The scent keeps him calm or at least

zoned but the lactic seep that comes with it like backwash sticks where it spreads and soon coats the inner skin, starving the chakrals of the digitalis. The exoshell is blind stumbling with the pit of the grub pushing the inner skin into motion via the metronome cascades of the trigger points. The stone floor is cracked and sieved and his crossings are staggered hopskips. Most times he has to gather himself together and in his grub there is less and less of him, less of the networked soul strung taut along the abraxas of the digitalis. That which burns with the heat of sunshine, from the transmuted daylight the Flora fed off.

It pushes against the grub, weaker and weaker every time.

So at least enough to learn they've been exiled to the Black Hole Barrows, all matter warped of light in reflection from beyond the horizon of dead stars. Indiced in a planarsea called Caesaria and kept far from the churns most looped through. What this means he knows just that they are far from Orche and far from his Alt and Tender. For both, he thinks, by now they could be severed from me.

Is there a way out, he ventures to them. The Empdruids with their grubsight distant, their exhumed sockets staring off and away, over the head of his shell, or into the corners of the Barrow. They surround him, a handful of grubs, and

the rest of the Exiles wander through the Barrow, centred by the mock council he's put together.

Drifting, he thinks, not here, not tethered even to the pit of their grubs. They've given up even on that. The breathing of the grubs in the dark he can hear, with his grub attuned. It spindles as if in between silent beats. Eking into the Barrow and finding his earclots now that he isn't talking. I can't languish here. It might last forever.

Orche put us here. No one even knows to look for us.

Who would look for us? The symmetry of their cluster letting the thoughts loop, containing them. So he doesn't have to follow them far to find them.

Phassa, on behalf of the chained angel.

Who is that, he signals to the locus. What he'd left behind to come here echoes even in the naked grub.

Phassa is the needle, the absence in prophecy.

Absent how?

The skips in what the Oracles told us. The meaning in the spaces between.

Can we signal it? Faint hope stirs in his naked grub. Though knowing not much, picking the bones of what they know dry. *Where my bones now earthbound remain absent and staring, beyond the black walls. Their stare is the first part, and the clean flame follows.*

When Acheron wakes, that will be a signal. Your Alt has marked much of the Chapel. Showing the thorn its insides.

So we just wait for it?

Acheron is... volatile. At this a whisper of nods fleeting through the chamber like branches rustling. Even in grub the Empdruids use massed life for expression, the way they used to train, tech up for it in their Tenders themselves always at the fringes. So that not centred, they couldn't draw on others, relied just on symbio-pheroweaves maintained by their Oracles. But Empdruids fall fast to the Oracles, their headspaces always ensconced by the thoughts of others. At the fringes obsessed with seeking out the Core to get it to stop. Tenders sustained on the symbio-pheroweaves led to keepers seeing the Skein naked, stranded through the Flora like mottling vein.

All this the exhumed Skein translates from the babelic fuzz of the Empdruids, of their thoughts piecemeal from

the thoughts of others, a tattered tapestry.

So it's like, Morgan thinks, they were getting ready without knowing it, their whole lives, for the grub.

Likely to seal the Barrows in his wrath. Broken from long communion with Orche. A sieve in his totality breaching, we think. A sunder in his sight he won't tolerate.

Up to Phassa to use your Alt to breach his sub-psyche. But what your Psyche Halo harvested... the protocols will be flumed across the digitalis and the spiders will follow them as strands to her. So many of them... they won't be scared.

What can we do? he signals.

Use the Skein, they re-sign, the threads never severed. That's why they're there, put in place to guide the EV. Bone hidden by the skin of the Chains which themselves have been damaged from some time. She stitched them over like you'd seam a wound but it's the thinnest of skins.

No matter how far the Oracles saw, they couldn't see saving them. They told her that in their sterile and severe weavings they chose to thread through her, just to let her

know what it feels like when something you lose matters to others even if it doesn't matter to you. Straight into her face or what she had of it so she couldn't say she wasn't listening. So she'd spun it, the exhumed Skein translates, weary now, strained, into something she could work with. A loss isn't a loss if it's all figured out. In your eyes, they'd told her, we can see the glimmers of the way you've traced all this, the eyes only we can see.

Can you hear me out there, then, he says, within his pit, and waits for the anguish of the stillness, settled over the grub like a blanket, to die with any echo. Any echo at all. In the pit of the grub the chambered void forages, for any nutrate at all, something to string its own passage, always killing distance, even and especially if severed from the skin it's known.

ACHERON

Acheron speaks with his eyes open. Eyes of green flame that are all she can see besides the Alt who's fritzing, blinking in and out but keeping a locus around the eyes.

Ten thousand dreams I can remember. You I remember, shrine pilgrim of the cleaving cloth.

Cammy thinks her ears have been modded to hear it. When I gave my sight to the tower of light, she thinks. Then she'd heard them, dry skitterings through the crystallace she'd been standing on. After her last turn to see.

The voice is ancient and crackles like spitfire with labour, charge and discharge, breaks in the sound like static.

She's no expert in marker protocols genned to transfer across stata, Faunic and tracing their lineage to the beast awoken now with eyes of fire and struggling against his bindings, but the kid's Alt looks old. Its skips, shimmer slides across the stone, are rough, sparking patterns that repeat in on themselves, like the Alt has trouble homing in before phasing across the digitalis with enough matter for her deatheyes to transmute them, get them into the shell of sight and thought that she isn't used to, is cold

and stark against her.

All this distant, though she can reach it, can call it her own cope before the eyes of fire, the broken sound punching through her earclots like needles lancing zits and the Alt buzzing around Acheron in unsure circles, at times closer to Acheron, at times further away. The eyes burn the green of peaking flame, of energy beneath going ersatz. There's a growl in the air that she picks from the barrage of sound like sifting dirt for twigs, for leaves, has to strain it before knowing it as the Alt. Of storm clouds brewing in churns of fate that she'll see just when they spool themselves into her trip, will be Acheron unchained snuffing her out with a lunge, a breath.

The Alt darts forward as if it's been willing itself, the whole time, crisscrossing Acheron and in the crisscross she can see in outline laced from shadow in burning blue glitch massive shape brought low with arms stretched. These by sparks of feature and contrast that she has to collage piece by piece, as the Alt attacks, smashing its body, subsumed each time by pluming translucent smoke and then glitched back in, again and again against the massive Fauna. Put together a rough working image that she clings to in the pit of her headspace.

I need, she thinks, to get out of here.

Even starting to back away she senses something's off. They aren't fighting. This is play as ritual, as something stirring deep within and rising from shared impulse. The Alt is focused on the bindings now, smashing into them in shimmer smoke and mewls of pain streak through the noise, stronger in echo off the walls of the Chapel. Hurting himself to free Acheron. In impulse borne deep seated; the mewls confused, stricken in timbre. The pain as question as it infiltrates whatever sensate you have. She knows it like she's feeling it for him. In the pit of the grub where there is space to hold it.

Light shines and engulfs the chamber. Even through her deathly sight it reaches her, swallows her. Is all she knows even in the pit of her grub.

All this was meant for you, Acheron says, voice like thunder pealing through the light. She's tracing her steps here, putting her back on it all soon, soon scampering through the inner hall of the Chapel. The light she's running from spilling ahead of her. It blasts through her. As it does she's filled with it. So heavy the digitalis beneath the stonework is stained with it, and like it'll collapse beneath her. Beneath her grub whose feet charter smooth marble with the

chill working its way through the shell. The light through her and past her, lapping at the bleak void that is what she sees and knows.



SAGE

Cammy talks to a sidewalk weed, spilling in stabs from Tri-Sunlight bleached pavement. The grub's absence and her body's presence hit her in waves, in sequence, a melody of feels kept tuned by the binary.

She's in the clothes she'd stepped into the Interwave with. Had she talked to Cat Eyes before she'd left? Can't remember. All that before what the Interwave had done to her. After she'd drank juiced Tri-Sun from the nightlights.

No, she thinks. Was that the Interwave? Was that something else?

She wasn't sure, finding herself talking to the weird weed tangled through the sidewalk. She'd been losing herself through mem dep and it's the weed talking to her that clues her that she's been getting the schizophrenia spam sessions in. Fitting them into pockets of absent memory, honing her own dep-chess skills, as if to prep herself for something final coming, something her conscious self would not know to prepare for, would call that prep toxic.

The weed says the streets are empty and there's no one but you. This isn't true. She sees stragglers like always

down the chiseled lane. From this she knows it's all a dep-chess puzzle, one where for the moment she's outmatched.

"Who are you?" she says.

You're new here. I'm new here.

Hopeless. She needs Jewel's read on it, she thinks, because someone broke sequence somewhere, and she thinks it may have been her, through him.

Without the grubshell she's free to move. Still she doesn't want to attract the eyes of other Cluster refs. If they're seeing it, the Velih have eyes through them. Began as some neurosis in the unseen Loum but they didn't know more than that, and Jewel'd been more worried about something else. That left all the noia for her to absorb, to process like she was a sponge for it, and the focus of every roaming dep-gamer besides.

Play the tape back, she thinks, and here I am talking to a flower.

Somewhere in all those spam sessions would be the key to getting through this, the right tech absorbed and looped through her subconscious, and grey is the colour of it. She

thinks, I should be neutral if I'm blind, if I can't even see who I'm fighting.

Neutral Lotus is what the spiders translated into their Oraclehood. That's funny. That stuff sticks, ick-bug, and you can get caught in it.

Hell this, she thinks. I'm sure of it now.

So she's about to process if it's time to try Jewel when she hears, in the daylight, the first warcry of the new day. Stabbing the hot air with the calls of the Gaijin Street Samurai, modulated through their hypertech, loaded out by true megacorp sponsorship, the favoured to take the Clusters this pro gang season.

She doesn't know that at the time because the GSS are new players. No one, not even the most together Loum prophets, had seen the Hiroko contract coming. Jewel had been blindsided, thinking the chillout trend, the voidic eyes, were markers not of something already in the Clusters. Of something still working into them.

She'd known that later. She'd stayed low as she made his way to him. His thread black with age and a mote aura that doesn't even try to translate feels past a cloud of worry. When she finds his aura she thinks he's hidden his physical, untwined any trace of it from the threads. Where she is, where they are, the mote auras have to cling to what's left of the husk which has been slow death for so long the final collapse of the tapestry is in sight. But even as she draws near his zoned, shifting aura, all oblique angles and opaque tones, she thinks, it could be all him.

So her aura feinting shyness, she still has the strength for that. Some reserve which she puts down to her subconscious gearing up. Planting the seeds to vine through her psyche and blossom in strengths she can use in case it's been his dep-chessing all along. Some people, she thinks, can't handle the barriers between themself and others.

Would want to entangle the world in their detailed schema.

So she says, dark enough here.

He bristles less than she thought he would. Draws into himself, inverse angles as if she's mutilating him with her nosing. Really spiking home the blade and the guilt washes across her own aura in reflex. Even in his weakness, but all this means is she gathers himself to put him out of his misery. I can do this without you, she thinks.

Look, she says. Those gangers out there make it hard for me to move. If you have any last thread for me to follow, I want it now. Because it's a Velih grater out there. All kills legal, just point-referenced.

He's silent, still.

There isn't even a thread to you. Says this and she knows she's put the freeze on, questions him in the agon of silence. Would I like what I saw, if I found you? What kind of shape you in, J?

This way she layers the moment with pregnancy, with all the time he has in the world to answer. When he answers

he'd better, she thinks, show some face to lose. If not in his aura in his concepts. As if all wounds in him have massed into one wound, a gaping void where he is, where he should be.

You moved with it, C. Translated the Loum through the Interwave somehow.

I did?

You kept us safe. An us. Pocketed an us and held it. Closed it off. They're saying the Interwave is dead now. I know why.

Shit, she says, why? Blowing it because she's thinking it through. Because the threads couldn't handle the complex. Hit the Interwave, yourself layered in already. But it would also work as...

Quarantine, he says, from the Dissembling. The crosswired Archeana.

Where are you? She says this tinging her aura with warmth, ready to chill it back if need be. Her mote aura grey, all familiar patterns but that washed out of it. Where before she'd been see through. Now she has a veiling to

work with. It about started, she thinks, when he went too far, brought her into his struggle. It's about breathing now.

By now posted in the ground, he says.

If she even had his lips to read. She has him embodied in aura and even that, she thinks, he'd woven of himself at first. Shrouded by the line of the turn-off. If she knew some flesh was attached somewhere she could deal.

So how are you posted at all?

I cut a deal with the Velih.

You've been using agents. People are more than backup skins. She switches course. Because a dep-chess gamer would be like that, see people as states instanced and embedded within the enmeshed threads of their world. Have a way to see, to feel, if they needed it.

Thanks to the grub she knows what it's like to be missing your skin. To think out there it is severed from you. To have lost belief that you will see yourself in some third eye reflected back at you, in some wired gamer's fantasies. It exists as break from the way others see you as the way you are. Breaks off and drifts until the two are lost from each

other. It could be slow or fast.

I*f you saw it coming it would bleed into what you said and did.* She can't forget the grub. Thinks she'll find herself there any second, as if that her true skin, as if this is a shadow of it.

You've met them, he says, but she'd been getting there too, and cuts him off. I don't want to fight, she says. It wouldn't be one now.

There are two.

Another gate, she thinks, a new frontier. I would win. Shouldn't make me your enemy now.

I don't need your permission to die, he says, and I don't need you for it now either. I existed on what I threaded into and left the real long ago.

So what, she says. Being with me in other skins is enough of an excuse. It's sketch, dude. If you can't get me a way clear, you're wasting my time. Her aura now bristles with feedback. She could, she thinks, cut him off. Cut him off and mercy kill the whole Loum. He would let her.

Still she softens up again, pink light the core fire of the

discharge which fades into grey as it reaches the aura extremes. If you want to hang onto this thing so bad, make it easy on me. Route me to somewhere stable.

Somewhere, he says, someone, it doesn't matter. It's past the point where they come for you. Its past the point where they let you know at all. They just file it with the system and after you get bugged there won't be anything waiting for you outside your skin either.

You could be bugged, she says. You said some shit about keeping an us but you could just be saying it. How would I know? Her aura runs the decay lines, getting what she can out of the frays and tatters. I don't like being spun, J.

If you beat my agents, he says, I'll give you the password.

The password to what, she says. This thing is deader than dead.

Because now, he says, there's a Loum beyond the Loum. Isn't there?

I guess, she says. She thinks about it. If you're you, she says, what could do that? What could make it work?

He doesn't answer. His mote aura has darkened as if to

match the pall of the dying threads. In the crookings of the plaits she sees the dulling and thinks of when it was lustrous, when pale shine coated the tufts. For a second she thinks she's frozen him again.

It would have its ways, he says, and she thinks of the sidewalk weed before the GSS had began a vibedown of the whole block. Talking to it as the Tri-Sunlight unfurled down the lane. Reasons, too. I think it likes you, C.

I'm logging off, she says. I know where to look for one of them. See you through another's eyes again soon. Even knowing logging off she'll have with her the sickly Loum and the creeping dark coating it. Take it with her as the motes fade out and in the stark real left behind the moments slice like every second she is reaching for a point where she will look back and say, if I ever knew how I got here, it was someone else knowing it.

SCOUDRA

She looks for Cat Eyes at Tachae's. Before she'd logged out Jewel had sent what spoolers he could, weaving the space around her into an aura. Marking her not for death but by death, by the space where what he has to breathe and move with should be. That space that is all that can be named for you. Wards off the gangers but not the dep-chess gamers, but them, she thinks, she can handle now that she knows she wants to fight.

Still she hears gunshots split the silence of the growing dusk. Looped again but every loop could be its final foray, she thinks. Then our chronals dissolve like bugs in acid. Our feelers counting off all this death and putting it into time.

She thinks of these dead soldiers showing up at the heraldic new dawn promised and saying, well you know I was good this season but I wasn't one of the best. As if the Velih would care about that or any other salvage of self. For them what matters is the tape and you can play that tape backwards and forwards or even splice it but the tape itself never changes. Spools out stranding like the Loum and long like a funeral dirge. It all means nothing then, condensed into splints and sacrificed one after the other

as if the universe was getting cosmic kickback for each dead moment.

If death had any grace, she thinks, it would throw them back.

So inside Tachae's and chambered by rotting meat paint. Where she'd blown the fuse before has been ordered from chaos but cinder marks suggest either she'd blown some shit to atoms or they'd recycled some flame from the Velih's vault. Fuck it, she thinks of Tachae saying to Cat Eyes. Char it clean.

Still she can't put a voice to that in her head because she doesn't have it to barter for wilful fantasy of sound cloven into speech. If she's ever met Tachae, she gets, she's traded that away too. This whole time though seeing him or her with the eyes you see those you've never met. Never gamed or been gamed on by. Futile eyes searching. She shrugs that away. Cat Eyes is gone and Tachae's presence is the aether of displaced vibes. Didn't he or she care that she was in there fucking their shit up?

Through another's eyes searching. Still where do those eyes go after they have slipped away behind just another facet? Even if there are just so many facets, so many ways,

that she knows of.

She thinks Tachae must have a feed set up, something letting him or her keep eyes on the place or when Cat Eye's not around any dreg could saunter in and loot the place down. Would the Velih be tuned then to that wavelength, and see that? It's not if they both saw the same thing but if they could see each other seeing.

She thinks, my eyes sieved into rippling pools reflected. To in between the light through glass. Where the symmetry and assymetry braid into each other the thread is serrated, not yet dead but peeling. To keep track. After the ache of the grub and the pit that gnawed through my voidic eyes.

It makes it a waiting game because her initial set up needs to be attacked. The hand forced. But in the darkness here she won't even see someone mapping her out. She could get hypersocialed so hard she'd see the seams, wind up so far down the strands her best option could be a suicide showdown with the gangers. Or else, she thinks, live in absence of stim from third parties. The null state that takes you out of the game for good. It happened to me once, she pictures a memdep saying. Socialed so hard I haven't talked to anyone any splint I can remember. That's what they would say if you talked to them, but you wouldn't.

Because, she thinks, if I end up with no other access, no other password...

So when it comes it's from a five o' clock bearing, meant to grief her and she stands and takes it knowing it puts her not at a mercy, not yet, but at least on the back foot. "T wasn't happy, basically. Said in the tapes it was as clear as our splints. Wasn't coming out of my time or value."

"Heard it before," she says in reflex, drawling, "guilt trips coming in hot. Get it together. You're probably not aware but I'm not doing this shit for myself."

Now makes a move to her slung pack and the beater within. Seeing if he'll stop her. Even turned off the glow of the pod is aurora sheen in glimmers beading bright past the casing. A flickering dew of light over the tape keeping it together. Buzzing frenetic. Burning her fingers as they graze it and then she's got it held loose by her side.

"Leave me alone, then, with what's left of you. Is that what you're saying? Pay it off with that and make some final trip." Now she does see, unveiled, the blankness, as the pupils track her movements, but it's the blankness that hosts, she thinks, the blankness is how I can tell by it. Within the blankness so much space for looking out. That's the trick,

and how I didn't catch it before.

Cat Eyes's own features are as blank beneath the sallow of his sloping slouch cap. In the blankness of both weathered by chronal after chronal of she thinks, this effect again dealing with freaks like her.

Thinking of him like he's on, she thinks, and shakes.

In the blankness of the eyes alone though the weathering is all time held and that she knows as a facet of Jewel. So she wonders how much could be left of him for him to call his own, someone else running purpose for your limbs.

"Scoudra. i56. The Dissembling. You're wondering if that has me, too.

"T doesn't care," he says after. "Says damages. We don't have," he rolls the word, "clientele, like the megacorpos do. We supply the losers. The side street hustlers being mowed down out there."

She shrugs. "Saints later."

"Yea," he says, with a long sigh. "We got all their names somewhere, right?" If there is a we, she thinks, and you can call yourself part of it. Even turned off, still slotted in,

still chained all up and down the threads, and still wayward as you tell yourself you are. Wayward as you pick which threads to follow, if you can log in, if you can even see them. Here where she'd blown out half the stock to be replaced if the Velih saw it fair. Cat Eyes would have a way to log in, she thinks, and it would be better than my beater. All the tech in the world puts me at his mercy for now.

She waits, thinking, this is doing what I can.

"Okay," he says. "But just to let you know. We deal with the B. Moths these days. You gotta pick a side, you know?"

"I don't follow that shit," she says. "Keep saying it," sitting down, crossing her legs, "that someone needs to check with the Velih over it." Have the tape show there's nothing wrong with it. Rolls her eyes. Sick puppies. She thinks of them with feelers now, white, translucent, the wings themselves knotted into use after the feathers were shed. She thinks of the pit of the grub and how it had been forever and splints to spare in there.

As if nothing would be more useful than that.

So before she even turns it on she stares at her charred eyes reflected in dead pixel, the pod fitting out the beater-

top's chassis and screen with a shifting aura of black light. Warping even her reflection on the dead screen and then she's thumbing it to life. The char dark in her eyes swims in the LCD, in the black light wavering. The hollows glint like gloss marble. Char hollows streaming black rippling through glass void and that's what the feeds paint themselves across, the death pooled in the pits of her eyes. Until now she hadn't seen them.

Hasn't seen them, and when they vanish beneath the feeds, she thinks, that's someone else's problem now.

INO'S VEIL

The voice talks back through the Skein, through cloy and clawing on the underskein that is roped through all pre-Exiles. Morgan thought it was in their skin, threaded there somehow with all the grace Orche and the Oracles could muster, but in the grub he still feels it, guesses they do too.

A font that never runs dry because it's the pull to the push and the push is what keeps the Skein strong through use. So hex knows it will stay even as the voice talks back through the pain, using it, bending it, refracting it the way a prism splits light. So that one strand of pain picked and split becomes two or three twisting. Spiderwebbing out to bind the pit of the grub. A rounded black stone like a glob of dirt strung fast and held within its own space.

Like, he thinks, a warning to the others.

Still the pit could be a morass, he thinks, and if so the pain could spread, choke up on all the space it needs to breathe. He asks the exhumed Skein if it can help, but it tells him that without SunNet signal there's not much it can do. such a base binary, it says after, like this helps. of uncertain apocryphal weight.

The buzz of communion through the barrow is faint. The grubs are bone thin, each breath ragged. They've evolved to breathe non-digitalis or at least what strain runs beyond the dead stars, but not well. The skin listens for the clotted ears, pulling double time intake of the flux and the buzz as it fades out, behind the pain, maybe all the way gone.

With each stab of pain like lactic burn white light sears the barrow. Tracing stroke to stab in silk lines like fine vapour trails. From that white light seeping the networked Sun. Constellated across the Barrow and the grubs incline to the sears of light like moths. The head tilts and the exhumed craters sweep for what he'd thought at first only he could see.

With the solaria seeping from the quicks of light the exhumed Skein translates. It excavates. From the strung network of pain, of what had begun choking the grub wiithout even the message, enmeshed anome relayed.

> There is not much I can carry, only dream your dreams for you. While I'm dreaming the gates are open and they may pass through either way

Where do they go, is his first thought, and the exhumed Skein translates an answer from the push and pull.

From you to you, it's the skin you left behind that needs your tears now.

Wait, he thinks. I can get it back?

If you think of it that way.

Still the nerve-interface of the grub runs its chloric lines, what it strands for veins like filament spools through the grey flesh, and along them the pain runs in signal verved by each and every sense-nexii. Crafted or grown to trace the push and pull by mapping it through time and placement in the grub, landmarked by chest or limb or the emptiness of skull socket. If I could, he thinks, follow the fear when it goes. The pain pulses, steady, solemn, and he reads from that acceptance. The exhumed Skein tells him that Mutate beyond the black walls is frozen over now for stasis. cold, it says, bleak, and the Flora dessicated.

mass grave for the Tenders and those who couldn't make it without them.

first priority after threading the Skein is he studies the grub's long fingers as the Skein talks, knowing what the it'll say next but not how it'll say it verify the caked flesh. dispatch it to shelter.

What's shelter, he thinks, meaning it as a joke. Soft, clinging to the string, the play between the three voices, and the whole Barrow hushed as if listening in. The Empdruids, he thinks, can, and they can pass it along. What would that look like?

prior the third: restitch geneweaves.

The emptiness chambered within the grub sockets fleet skyward or what passes for his sky. Char grey domes the hollow of the Barrow, sieved and blistered now by white scorch.

Right, he thinks, that's something you do, you just do it and it wouldn't be hard at all in the Freeze. Feeling as you would the whole time one more mote in the blizzard. The Frost prepping the proto-stage of planetconsciousness for archival, to be used as a physical front when needed. Something Orche needs now not as skin but as a coat to slip into, a veil to hide behind, when she needs it. All other times she'd rather be other ways as long as it's on call for her, the way it isn't for me.

"You hate Orche, right?" he says, "the way I hate her, I mean."

The exhumed Skein says it could translate, doesn't need it answered in ache. He tells it he has to feel it. To transcribe right, he thinks. In my own body I'll need to know.

When it comes it starts as trembling, a quaver in the shell, rippling locus to ends, wahsing out the Exiles, the exhumed Skein all trying to find out where he's at and losing him, losing him past the splitting anome like phosphor burning through the pit of the grub. The pit revealed as something to burn through.

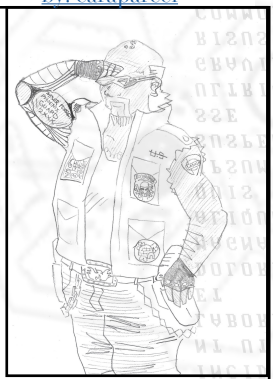
Strung synapse the noose, and the psyche halo the fall. It resembles, cloister by cloister cutting off facet from face, each glinting line marking each crag and rise. Born dimpled and bruised, he thinks, and any I meet

Shucked themselves free from this exile. Other huskshedders with bodies waiting. The light sears his forehead, flash cools, bands him in the stream. Glimmer plates banded by light and the light joins, curves, wraps around him. The strung light. From there spidering into and filling the grub. The black stone gleams. Rounded and moted, in the white shine a smear that disfigures it like skin mottles, like bruise even as the light washes out the pit.

by: caraparcel

PSYCHOGRAMMA

character profile



Name: alleppo

Sex: male

Occupation: vanguard commandant

Blood type: O+

Likes: pho noodles, collecting info, silent communication

Dislikes: harsh lighting

Seen with: spider, dacia, victor

been in the vanguards since the fragmentations of the states. many of the first vanguard operators who aided in freeing georgia had the equivalent of osint's capability which allowed them to adapt easily to the growing virtual spaces from the wired. alleppo's parents were ui designers and he would have followed in this were it not for the presence of inter-state interference trying to discredit the newly acquired cities. the likes of which have either been abandoned by other states into the realms of the wired, or seen as a mere vacation destination for those looking for a sense of reality with the populated

streets and sideshows happening at intersections. some have described alleppo as having this uncanny ability to disengage. battle psychologists diagnose this as stemming from the loss of a whole squad during a reconnaissance operation into the spirit world. leaving him the only survivor with claims that the only thing left on earth is its brutality, or perhaps, its former history of subjugation. however, dacia and spider have seen him like this before and have said this continued even after he recovered. his prosthetic right arm conducts information from whatever it touches. surgical in his movements, his psycho silhouette can slow down whatever is in its radius, even other users caught off guard. however, he seems to have the tendency to march into danger with not a whisper, or a sound but with only a grin.

Synopsis

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.

Last Time

foxtel and viper visit the successful american city-state that was once atlanta, meet overseas operators and uncover a network making nefarious use of virtual doubles

CW: doppelgänger, guns, combat, sexual banter, surveillance, body parts (disembodied), death, organ harvesting, altered physical/mental states, ghosts

tracking them in another server space, light shines through the far windows, someone who looks like me behind them moving through each pane like watching myself in a screen, so disconnected from the heat encroached upon my limbs, racks from the shelves like threads of a darkness that as i felt its metal surface on my back, with the sheen of electric signals coursing through the roots, the rhizomes sprawled in my neurora into my fingers, these sensations that formed the glow of my limbs, a kind of bloom, almost a confirmation, that the roots of my thoughts began as i look glassware, contorting the fluorescent hallway outside before shattering. raising the stock at my shoulder, its polymer throttled into rear ends of the machine pistol's lithe grip in my hands, the glare of phosphorescence flickers into the gleam of smooth egg-

PROTOCOL 03.2: SECOND FACE II

shell wall, a bit caught between the notch at the centre of the vp70m's front sight as if all of rose from this darkness that haunted these rooms, these server spaces and their supposed endless blue thatched in connections. even the one i engaged with the double in flickers of muzzle flashes.

. walls stretch towards the next server space until they-melt intopuddles of ink spilt beside cars as fluorescent tubes lined above us, its light glazed across my eye until it blurred everything just before the next blink as i hurry behind an ambassador sedan, the tail of my jacket pooled under me, seeing myself stretched across the broad fender as white strings bent above the wheel well. placing my hand across the sedan's body left a ghastly streak from my fingertips. us being mere breezes that swept across these cars, perhaps glimpsing each other within the gloss paint until everything became a mere movement, the kind that looped under high rises in timelapses of previous century urban centres, except now, these cars took place of those unerring structures, almost as if they etched a memory of cities within a mind that raced through several of them as i and i traded fire, tolls of 9mm shots rang out until we heard only cracked filament and glass interspersed between metal pounds. catching a glance, and a barrel of i's pistol, i threw myself down as glass shattered just above me yet the shot scalded my arm as i watch the smoke trail

unravel, a jacket flutters in the distance. had it been that perhaps in any kind of firefight encounter, a part of me stayed dormant upon each raise of the vp70m or when i pulled the trigger of the g3ka4's battle rifle, all the force that burrowed into my shoulder relents as a 7.62x51mm round speared forth, did all these movements occur removed from me and with the electric signals processing each movement sparkling around me, there was little more than the brief contour of a limb not yet cooled within the polished momentum of my steps in the wired, my hands only looking similar to my own in the real world as they cradled each weapon, some faint echo of mortality that i too shared the same silhouette as the contacts before me, each pull of the trigger and letting the recoil seize my hands, its own fleeting touch, or perhaps within my body comprised of signals, the last touch. neija circulated the sensation until it felt like little more than grafted tissue on my flesh and i stepped towards the convertible paces away before a step transfer took me to its door but strain heaved onto my nerves, pain encroaching on me, negative sensation the other constant that'd always interrupt each dive into the wired, the kind that some users celebrated, saying that it was real in the same way as equating the real as some punishing god whose acolytes always prayed to destroy the world. as the double's signal strength is strong,

it would be difficult, concealment would be basic as its signals would be used to maintain its form and bandwidth would be limited since we were the only ones comprised of electric signals. i'd even be surprised if there was enough virtual space to even exit. using an echolocater, i let a halo expand across the ground and as soon as it rose over a silhouette i raised myself up firing from behind the convertible's hood, and i also leapt out of cover, the mirror completes its reflection.

as a child, producer told that on the wired, a user was a mere node and our interactions transited the movements of the day, completing an array of needs and agitation until i returned to my room, the aches spread across my body, nervosa bloomed until even it felt like its own discharged luminescence, the particles stirred within me and the fluorescent light above thinned out the nights.

steps shot me forward beating between windows shattered under the arches of car roofs.,

kunakida once asked me what kind of avatar i should take when i told her my appearance on the wired wasn't all that different from reality. had i carried myself, the past and their sensations on the wired, waiting for each stem of these flowers to bloom with electric petals.

rolling off the hood of a coupe, a 9mm round embeds itself into a grey crater. appearing before others, light sinks around them until it left a slight glow across their faces and it felt like if i got closer, the annihilation of the world would be complete leaving us both the only ones left.

they tear a door open within the iron halo of theg3ka4's front sight, firing the rifle punctures through metal , the pleather inserts behind it barely smothered the round that bored open the door gently closes while they dive through the interior and out the other side.

when producer put me in contact with tai shu, a girl with a leather jacket appeared before me and i realized it was someone i knew from when i was young. given it was information i could use for conversation, i would try to speak to her but she'd never let me mention such, becoming a secret as we'd talk on footbridges over 21st century street servers where it seemed all our meetings were a kind of first meeting, the possibilities of a city that tethered all these intersections and connections on the wired.

switching the vp70 to semi-auto, i tilt the handgun off the bumper glancing their side and within a breath anticipating them enter the corridor just atop the vp70m's muzzle, i pull the trigger., 9mm rounds shunted them to the ground

and in their stumble, they leap into a roll where i start my advance. the g3ka4 bored deep valleys within me from recoil that consumed me entire until my grasp n the hand-guard felt so distant like shadows on the smooth plastic surface.

burst fire and semi-auto fire from the vp70m crinkled grey valleys until its depths could fracture me into several parts like crunching sheets of paper into refuse, all held together within the grooves in the grip where my thumb was seated. each shot at the target or combat-sim viper set up merely tore through silhouettes, despite the sounds of bullets piercing flesh, engorging innards merely fell on my ears like solid objects falling to the ground, decals of blood or torn kevlar blotted across the frequencies and wavelengths i moved through, step transfers melted me into the air a moment before carving myself anew out of the space at the doppelganger's head, only glancing a muzzle flash that rolled across their eye like a sunrise as a 9mm round, trigger pulled as i found my own contours reining themselves from the heat in my fingers, wrenching their head back before falling to the ground. their psycho-sill-houette recedes and electric signals spike along my limbs again, my throat catchesitself before breaths drove their way through while my pulses resumed their functions.

alleppo appeared beside me, hand behind my shoulder with the hk45 handgun drawn, the serrations across the slide like grey rays but upon seeing the fallen doppelganger, he relaxed patting me on the back while a vanguard team scattered themselves amidst the cars, their formations rooted them where they would set up an annex for a triage space that soon envelops everything in grey..

'you aight?' he asked.

'yeah...fine...did anything happen on your side?'

'something like that, someone that looked like me appeared too but he ain't nothing on the real thing' he laughed.

'what'd they say?'

'not much but the references were pretty convincing. the only thing about them that was real was their body. the face was merely like an avatar. usually a user's avatar has that right? the feeling of electric signals that'd make a movement feel slightly discontinuous?'

'yeah, right...like the difference between 2d and 3d animation.'

'check the doppelganger's face'

warmth faded as they turned into the bites of frosted static, flesh engorged around a half open mouth.

'still, it feels kinda uncanny. it simulating the biological like that.'

'our vanguard team got a few of the missing persons but the ones from far back aren't even with silk road no more. we're gonna have to act fast to get the rest of them back.'

'sure'

'it's gonna take some time to get to the afterlives but we oughta check up on something first.'

logging into his apartment again, threads connected the missing persons as alleppo opens his hand, showing me his os as i've compiled our data from the doppelgangers. their signal origins led to empty rooms once the vanguard teams arrived, and allepo stared into the electric signals shimmering through his eyes trying to catch a single grain of what eluded them, what left shadows within the sterile floors, inputting the profile of the reporter, the missing persons appear in rapid succession around his photo as the threads soon converge to him, mapping him exactly as the culprit where the lines of data converged yet al-

leppo hesitated upon seeing this and only approached slowly, opening the source photos surrounding a high rise apartment within the city, each of the missing persons appearing in their plazas with unsteady smiles or wayward glances not knowing they were being photographed carved out of the flows of passersby until they were in particular poses from a community that lay beyond the wired, or rather the congregations that always awaited at the end of the electric signals, maybe remembering those old high rises with the several windows thinking we could peer into them, and these photos being those glimpses into their lovely congregations.

'what kind of data would a photo give?'

'it's not really the photo but one's feelin' about it can absolutely influence one's os and capabilities.'

'what do you mean'

'you know, it alters the texture of the os, meaning it can do way more than simply execute its directives. same way our weapons in the wired work. they're referenced on real counterparts and depending on our feel about them, they can be modded to our configs.'

pulling up the reporter's file, with permission from the admin teams within the city, it showed his current residence as well as his current whereabouts on map screens, their streets weaved the tapestry that this case entangled itself in that seemed so similar to the wired, its nodes that things happened and in turn, intersected.

'think we should take them in? or we could leave it to the other vanguard teams'

'nah, something's not right about this though...let's scope his place when he ain't there'

heading out in alleppo's porsche, it rocked slightly turning each corner but it soon rode through in tight curves before it sprung us forward again, buildings melted across the car's body like lights off a raindrop, silos stretched forth into the headlamps, the hood dove towards the bumper lip, the city contracted and breathed into intersections all within the windshield and all the movement surrounded us thinking these the sensations that lay in the world just outside of us as the light beams from the headlamps illumined murals and arches leapt on the buildings, thinking even this radiance could birth these new structures and inhabitants all within the tremors of the rear engine that propelled us through like a thousand movements circulat-

ed around us like a kind of world.

at stoplights, we idled next to convertible muscle cars winking with the chrome of the old space race back when everyone began to imagine the possibility of these smooth surfaces although our reflections could not escape them but even as the electric signals bathed the warmth of this evening, the occupants of the vehicle glanced over and a man in a beanie and discerning expression whose brow wracked with a skepticism that barely faltered as he nodded to alleppo.

'you on patrol or something?' the man asked.

'something like that, cusco. i'm looking for someone'

'right, and i'm a matchmaker' cusco shook his head to the laughter of the people around him. 'seems like you're in a fitting place, vanguard teams are running around the place. you trying to start a war or something. or should i say a proxy conflict'

'it's the missing persons, blood. they in the area.'

'well, shit, aight, but i just wanna let you know all kinda people gon be watching and speculating or something'

'right, well open out the runway then'

'no doubt'

on green, hydraulic suspensions spring up the front of the convertible impala as its rear lights leave a red pool trailing across the ground.

inside an apartment block, alleppo shows his id-pass to the lobby guard who barely gives us another glance before we go through the hallways with several doors lit by glass roses between them.

'not to be too discerning about interior design but this place looks seedy'

'well my bad this ain't like them love hotels y'all got out east'

'nah, but these glass flowers, either it's classy or imitating it like those love hotels made after castles'

'made after castles? nah, maybe these fools are haunted by gardens. wants a flower that lives forever'

at the door, alleppo touched its surface and slides his hand off of it before moving back, taking his akms rifle by their

grips serrated around his fingers before filling his palms, gas tube extends out of the handguard until it swooped down to ring the long barrel pointed downwards as he stood by awaiting entry, sharing his os, a map of the building displayed before me the corridor budded in squares that represented the rooms around us, enclosed shapes that oversaw our encounters, much like a vine that courses its veins that pool out into leaves, where all this movement was to dwell, the surface where the light from the glass roses spilled onto.

alleppo crouched to pick the lock with a punch and chisel before turning it, the click of the unlocked door, and soon the turn of the knob and entering, within these handful of seconds the slit of darkness illuminated past the edge of the door envelops us, the handguard mounted flashlight on alleppo's rifle shone a beam that glazes across miniature plazas or parked cars, catching glimpses of familiar individuals, the missing persons appearing before us just at a distance yet their faces did not move or turn away, rather the whole plaza they were in flipped to the side like flipping through books until we saw them imposed on sheets hanging off wire from the ceiling. our os' rippled a halo across the floor, coating the walls finding nothing else in the room other than these hanging photos until we

sink into darkness again almost like spectres that haunted these photographs, our limbs shining just for a moment in the slightest flicker of light from out in the corridor, these images floated in the ether that held all of them, whenever they caught light, they reemerged like from a memory, a signal.

'this man's got some kinda way'

'yeah, but with all the missing persons? i'm not sure that's all'

'me neither, man'

before i took a step, someone ran to the door filling its frame with their silhouette and before i could turn, the ceiling light seared my eyes a moment revealing a mal-furnished room with only a fold out table by the l-shaped counter hooked around the kitchen area,

'what are-' the reporter asked before i point the vp70m at him which got him to raise his hands while alleppo kept his rifle pointed up as he approached the reporter.

'i got some questions for you man, now it's our turn to do some asking'

'as always you must really be looking for a so called culprit' another voice said which kept alleppo from saying anything more as he only kept a careful vigil on who would approach as the reporter moved inside, an afro-eurasian man in a pinstriped formal jacket that opened diagonally from the shoulder who walked in deliberate steps, the curl of his fingers that seemed to wound him into slow refined gestures.

'victor... ...' alleppo sighed. i had remembered seeing his name with the various real estate companies selling rooms that were always close to some kind of life, a kind of radiance shone from the headlights of passing cars and just within them were crowds that they could entangle themselves into. victor was never part of those crowds and always stayed at some distance away, watching all these streets at a distance that netted these buildings, seeing just how far everyone would be going until, like a ripple clearing on the surface of a lake, everything became clear and seeing the sum of all those movements would be what he coasted through the days with as he laughed at alleppo's remark.

'now there's no need for that, we're aiming for excellence

in what we do, don't we?

'whatever' alleppo groaned before his voice took a low octave almost to shroud victor's frivolity. 'so what is it that you're doing around here' '

'settle down...i ain't no platinum torus helio. i try to be more...self aware . just that this is a way to connect ourselves to the global market. physical space is making a comeback but i ain't gonna argue what's real...although its marketing is what brings people here anyway.'

'so why are you here?'

'just business. the things that even the wired still maintains. especially when people still need a place in the real world'

back then, the wired came as this new eden across offices with sprawling fields, images flickered out of its endless blue, forever summertime. discontinuous frames of cities and statues within white windows soon expanded until their irradiated light bathed us until we inhabited plazas and spaces, the bulletin and post systems became avatars that walked with us, several floes and connections, and soon found ourselves rebounded between these cities and

the cities we lived in, from one breath to the next, one surge before it dissipates into these familiar buildings, these lights from all the intersections being made and they said things were moving even within blue light.

'victor...you're the real estate magnate?' i ask.

'ah, so you've heard of me. very flattered. many of tai shu's operatives have been very understanding. as you know, new atlanta is very particular about its collaborators. of course, something from history. it seems the old world still has its grips on us it seems'

'and its hands still work us too'

'doesn't it?'

'what's your association with this reporter...he's got photos of missing persons in my case' alleppo asked

'all explainable. he's been capturing a portrait of the clientele base here. people want to know about the new atlanta so it would've been better to go to the source'

'why not just make or curate content. i'm sure there are plenty of artists who can do that for you'

'ah, surveillance is its own data, pointing towards the real. are you familiar with street photography? these are candid shots, taking a much more raw look at the real life here, the way that even our selves on the wired stumble against. it's like watching people cross by the thousands of images of people on billboards...televisions back in the day'

'but still...'

'yes...you do have a job to do and i have mine. i'll happily let you analyze our data annals. perhaps there is a leak we aren't aware of'

'looking for hired help and here i am?' alleppo sneered.

'i guess things have aligned so sweetly haven't they?'

'data annals...they're old channels right?'

'yes. slower than transfers on the wired but get greater fidelity and details, especially on these prints.'

going into data annals was usually dangerous as one would have to maintain a strong psycho-silhouette lest a barrage of information and data flood one's synapses. alleppo moves his neck side to side and calls dacia although that just meanthe chuckled, hearing her and then moved his

head around as if the response jostled it and he apologized for the late call. if it was a phone, i'd probably hearing the scratching of her voice on a small speaker.

'yeah sorry ma, it's kind of an emergency, you know, diving in data anna-no i'm not just poking around causing trouble damn.'

eventually he said his thanks and turned to me.

'alright, we got an outside connection spotting us so that means we won't get flooded.'

'well that's assuring'

'just don't think nothing dirty.'

'fine...'

'alright victor, the access, if you will' alleppo said.

'certainly, gentlemen'

alleppo rolled his eyes as warmth bathes the darkness, veils of aurora fluttered, within their arches, users, clothes, cars melted into data and electric signals coursing with the thrums of my veins halted a moment as alleppo's hands

slapped my chest until a breath, neija circulated qi within my merideans until the barrage of signals glaxed iver my contours like rain upon a window, yet it still emanated heat slightly out of reach like a sun, its heat producing these several mirages contorted in the tepid air until they sliced down faceless high rises, most likely tethered to the real world, its reference model that mapped out streets stretching nowhere, their intersections that surrounded us as the aurora tempered into a sunset cooling the afternoon in pink skies. . perhaps alleppo's triages were similar, ejecting into the tumult of atlanta before entering into the wired's distant connections that flew into unknown continents.

before alleppo could come to me, wind erupted with the firing of a 7.62x51mm round until all even our steps and coat flutters seemed so far away, spurs of heat clamped onto my limbs but i still threw myself behind a garden box, alleppo crouched before sliding back towards a pulse of static that sketched a car before its metal reflected strands of light, sunken into the puncture of the 7.62x51mm round. concrete teetered underneath, breath staggered with a gaze flitted to aleppo who strode out, several shots shrieked through the air, sparkling with the glint of electric signals as each round speared shirts or

pants that trailed alleppo who then lifted his akms rifle and with only the slightest tension, gave controlled bursts firing until one building remained, the sniper's shots only seemed to interrupt the little rhapsody from the expulsion of 7.62x39mm rounds ripped out of the ejection port, recoil hardly threw his aim as within the hybrid sight, it was only a matter of time before his next pulls of the trigger would decide it, but not before sniper fire plunges itself near alleppo who then takes cover, where i glimpse in his psycho-silhouette, this pool of light, he is behind a van flipped on its side. narrowly avoiding a shot that curved around his psycho-silhouette scattering chromatic smoke pooling in the air as if blood.

'that g3a3 of yours could reach him. you got a scope?'

'sure'

'i'll cover you,'

signals rushed into my hands until i grasped the scope sliding the mount along the shaft until it locked in, placing the stock into my shoulder, polymer leaps up onto the rifle's length as i swing outward, rubber pecks around my eye until it swallows my sight into the reticle, pulling the trigger seizes across my arms, a droplet of concrete

fixed under me until all that remains is air torn up by 7.62x51mm rounds carving the ledge of the rooftop where the sniper's silhouette flits through the haze almost like static, each pull of the trigger seemed to make their presence more and more real, as something that encroached around me even as it crosses the center of reticle yet only a spark flickers off them as the assailant crouches out of my sightline.

'yo, mans got a psycho silhouette too. you won't be able to hit him that easily.' alleppo said over os communication.

'i'll go up to him.'

'nah, i will, i got more cqc suitable weapons man' alleppo said as he moved off and i sustained fire, muzzle flashes seared all the data around me into blots spilled within the air only carved into recognizable shapes within the bounds of the scope, this solitary planet and its atmosphere contracting into it with every trigger pulled, the small breezes that relieved us from their heat for just a moment, sheets of light, twisted into the rotations of each bullet careened between us as clouds breathed out of shattered concrete, petals born out of the craters within our most total of annihilations.

tides of light flickered on the rooftop as an access route opened wherei leap to aleppo's position, , the faceless high rises merged into a concrete plane, yet an entire glut of electric signals drooled across my hand as i saw it flush on the sniper's face, one of a young boy whose gritted teeth unwillingly released of its tension that seemed to hold them upon facing us, the surrender upon seeing our weapons drawn to him, the chamber of their rifle, locked back, smoke risen, meandering around the expulsions of gunpowder that tossed shell casings in fountained arcs. unlike a normal avatar, there would always be a kind of interference that ebbed across our contours as our movements moved from one coordinate to the next, with the swing of an arm, or the landing of a step flitted just between that moment. perhaps this static resided where all this movement would originate from and if it could grant our limbs a fluidity that skimmed each star within the ebon air.

flesh melted off the sniper's face until an oblong head remained, carved smooth of any features only reflecting us within it, a silhouette of a person attached only by the glimpses of passersby, only existing according to those be-

fore it as they attempted to escape alleppo's radius but they only remained a target, a single 7.62x39mm round from the akms rifle to their leg incapacitated them, a triage space consumes us in grey as the sniper's face then reveals itself as a clean shaven man whose face seemingly attracted only the faintest of shadow until there was a dim vitality to his skin,

'so i see you've made it' they smirked looking at alleppo. 'your psycho-silhouette is strong, almost like a full transfer, i can almost feel the coursing of your veins,

'not really something you'd say to two people about to shoot you. you're lucky we didn't dome you then and there.' alleppo said as he backed up slightly, almost trying to avoid being within the glimmer of the sniper who stared at him, his movements measured not wanting to give away any excess movement thinking they could lash out towards any expression of life from his breathing, the throbs of his neck.

'hmph...' the sniper sits back before his smile grew in recognition. 'you saw it didn't you? the face? everyone i knew saw it and they wanted a piece of that but every single time i try to remember it, it's just a piece of a body, like a limb, an organ. you may preserve a body by any account...'

‘who’s sending you to do this’

‘why...no one. we’re just trying to reify ourselves aren’t we?’

alleppo sighed grabbing the sniper, their smile piqcued upon this hand whose fingers sunk into their arm but their glee soon disappeared when they realized that those fingers didn’t transmit heat but it was the prosthetic arm, its fingers only clutched rather than transmit the feeling of touch. alleppo shared his os which revealed a clear data file and connected us to victor’s private server, vertices of the triage cube opened out into a grey vista, skewed frames sunk into the ground while a pallet shaded us like an ashen leaf as light rippled in glowing filaments around us as if refracted from an unseen oasis. we sat in the lone hourglass table where victor and the sniper seemed to be waiting for us. we took our seats and the curved chairs prickled with static despite wrapping around our backs in a fluid motion.

‘so this is the one causing trouble. should’ve thought it be the actions of a person like this, all these people with guns running around’ victor said and from there, these crimes reduced to the twitches of the sniper, the one to blame, the culprit. alleppo glanced at victor just nearing a

glare perhaps that same disdain must've looked upon us, thinking of us as little more than trouble, just people in the way of some great purpose, the kind seemingly coiled victor, as he rested his leg on his knee, the slow dawn of a smile that basked within the grey expanse around us, clouds underneath rolled into the shadows of a knoll and i wondered if a dusky expanse would unfold in that ether. 'so care to explain yourself?'

'you won't believe it' they murmured, their lips agape and eyes staring as if not wanting to confirm that face they had, like one loose word would have sealed them to its flesh, its risen cheeks, previously dissolved within signals until they became fluid shape and not a mere glimmer of freedom but now he returned to who they once were, almost like returning as a corpse.

'will we? well, we are here for that reason and these two won't do without an answer like that, will they? that's not exactly a transaction rendered.' victor slapped his knee, hoping to usher the conversation forward.

alleppo sighed at taking this order or the way victor always slotted himself to take some sort of lead before projecting the image from his internal os of the face, suspended within the static, each pixel blotted into the cells of a virtual

flesh. widened eyes. the sniper then cut their gaze to the side, avoiding that disembodied face's stare.

'it just started appearing to me...'

'we saw your avatar's modded back there...'

'that's right, that is odd! even here, the signal strength here wavers just slightly' victor exclaimed and sat back.

'how many of you want to even be real here on the wired, the real is just a faint memory here.' the sniper stated.

'well, i'm sorry to disappoint you but your whole real is rather delusional.'

'wh-wha?'

'that face was a missing person whose empty room was marketed years ago. their comatose body soon lost its vitals and its organs were distributed by the hospitals. it was hard to sell that room, especially to the ones sensitive to

spiritual matters...' victor said.

'but that face-'

'little more than a figment. of imagination. you thought you encountered something real on the wired? everyone claims such, just because you're alive? just because you have blood or you breathe or feel? things on the wired are merely just connections, in the same way your cells hold tissue together. people get swayed by a truth so easily these days it seems' victor stated. that in this world, there was mere form and movement in the wired, all of it crumbling once one emerged in the real world. even in victor's private server, the grey hue barely flitted as only we remained at gathered at this table, the skewed frames that captured only of a wind that could coil through them and in this space all we could do was stare, whether it was someone in the real or the wired, there were only those figures that remained the same even within electric signals that only replicated these familiar contours that could witness the same cities or fields sculpted out of static.

'but this weight, the heart, it felt more real...like it was with the wired and...' the sniper murmured before someone appeared behind them, a bulky set individual with sunglasses and suit vest over wrinkled sleeves of a crème

dress-shirt.

'please escort them to the incoming vanguard team.' victor instructed.

'understood'

with their hand on the sniper's shoulder, their forms dissolved into pixels, perhaps the possible reports that would have to be filed within the unseen offices victor loaded in some tea in a decagonal pot and offered us some but alleppo merely slouched in his seat eyeing him.

'just what was that?' he asked.

'why, the answer to this puzzle. should have known that the perpetrator would just be some mere criminal.' victor brushed his hands off his cufflinks. 'besides, it saves much of the pyrotechinics, really...oh and the information is sent to you if you want it verified'

from alleppo, the report also appeared in my internal os detailing the apartment dimensions, the previous tenant's details with a lot of activity on the wired, the hospital listed a severed link causing them to be comatose. beyond this alleppo spent his time with little ease, even the restored

smoothness of the chairs seemed almost alien to him as he maintained his balanced posture, his bootsoles planted on the ground while victor merely rested his weight, leaning on his elbow on the table.

'i don't get it, if you had this information, maybe you ought to have brought it up'

'well, i didn't know it would be relevant. besides, a couple people see a face, why, with somewhere as turbulent as the wired, i'm sure people see many things.'

'a face we've seen as well?'

'there's always unexplained phenomena like that. not exactly something that needs to be worried about. someone interested enough will figure it out. maybe it could be you' victor winked.

'i suppose i should expect this from you anyhow...'

'listen...this is merely the nature of the wired. connections will be made. yes, in our history this place was our emancipation but at the same time, we ought to show ourselves to the other continents otherwise, we'd just be an isolationist state. people come here looking for the lost reality. i guess

it's a shame some have other ideas about that.'

'maybe, i just hope you know what you're doing' alleppo shook his head.

'what we do is within reason is it not?' victor's hands opened and it seemed to him, that this city, its concrete parched that its grains crumbled off the kicks from the dashes of their inhabitants running by, their veins pumped until the sensations that softened the streetlights could spill into air, oases where weeds and overgrowth could allow themselves to bloom, seeing this overwrought life and thinking it being the last strains of it. or rather, maybe it was more like the wired then, electric signals, that surrounded us, each about to be someone that could enter within our space much like passersby, how much these users or people around us could change everything even outside of these marrowed buildings, nerve ending streets spread until they went elsewhere outside of us into the distance where everything else was, where we could glimpse the cloth of these threads that we all stood on. to victor, it must have been a kind of bone that upheld all this activity where alleppo would be, sitting on the steps surrounding the buildings etched in arches until it was this city whose places we all shared, knew where to meet

up at, the dreams of the wired long ago whose connections made it no longer something completely remote from the signal's glimmer but its light that flitted through plazas and servers with things we both could know and inhabit. alleppo, victor, dacia, spider, even viper werepart of these cities and so had i entwined myself with them even amidst a psychosphere tinged with the faceless high rises from the east continent tattered itself between them, those within buildings, the crowds outside, clotted up by their cars or along the low walls of ramped walkways and the lengths of railings, all within even the face of that previous tenant,what would they have been to these cities inhabiting that room, now a small light sparked within memory perhaps somewhere within the same nothing our cells, each byte circulating within the wired now resided..

signals radiate off our contours until they sucked onto the solid walls of the corridor ready to tinge whatever lay beyond the concrete around us into a solidity that the thousands of cells, the thousands of bytes in our internal os could multiply until there was no longer any lack in its form, until it was complete, no longer an extraneous strain in our nerves piquing our eyes or softening until the ui could carve into our gaze as we examined the door to the room once owned by the person whose face wan-

dered amidst the static, as we enter, my echolocator drops a node, its blue halo sunk into the glow of several tubes housing organs, glints of servers hum with the circulation of unseen fans and cables transporting electricity towards the large tubes, their contents familiar pieces of viscera within the cobalt liquid floating almost as if a hallucination, blinking almost does away with the room, a tub with a hand hanging out of its side, stained sheets and garbage bags farther down, silver carts, their sterile surfaces almost so familiar to the point that as we cleared the room, the excess signals slunk away leaving the gleam that cleaved off the scene moments ago, almost thudding from an inescapable real, these rooms that had seemed a mere instance from the wired, a hidden violence of dying cells that we forgot about but now reared itself in the jagged lines of the ui in front of us from the limited signals.

'these guys cleared quick...' alleppo noted. 'i did catch photos from my os before it disappeared'

images appeared in front of me, but it was like looking at a painting at any moment if i placed a hand on the test tubes or bath tubs or server systems, my hand would only glide up against the panorama's curve.

'so this guy's a patient zero...doesn't explain why every-

one's trying to get organs and why his phantom's around'

'yeah...if they wanted organs they wouldn't need the presence of that face, or doppelgangers...it just sounds like someone went to market with it. maybe whoever did that shoulda went to victor for advice'

'so what about in the city. think we can at least clear these organ rooms?'

'that's gonna take a while. besides, people supposedly come here to experience the real. except someone took that a bit too far now'

'according to that sniper, he saw a face, as did one of the missing persons. the sniper claimed the face appeared and suddenly they're hunting people who rented homes out of victor's company. doppelgangers appear and lure people as it did the missing persons, and us.'

'maybe we need to think of this a different way'

'what do you mean'

'well, obviously that trail means, we gotta wait on another person to go missing and the fact we took out those doppelgangers just means either operators or whoever can't

take us out, but i ain't waiting on that.'

'right. so we'll need to be ahead. i mean can the vanguard team trace large signal outputs?'

'they already on that but if they can clear as soon as we move then the chase goes on. even pieces of data have some kinda link...' alleppo looked aside to the walls, faint shadows stained across the grey stucco almost as if the flesh of light became sickly but alleppo then moved out of the door, sending coordinates to me as we headed out, the warmth of the night met our own as our movement seemed like the only thing that kept us going, even as we entered the porsche, the buildings around us seemed like fragments of the smooth surfaces etched briefly into the ebony sky as they went by us.

with high arched entrances presided by minimalist palaces of spheric mausoleums with smooth faces that tethered a waved sheet that shaded the plaza area where exotic sport cars with flexed bumpers and long wedged hoods whip past in a slide while the tires whirl smoke into to old boom-bap distorted in static, crunching the drums into jagged noise that trembled within the bowls of the stereos from the open trunks of lowriders where men in oversized shirts take their seats while crowds amass and disperse

to make room for the spinning sports cars, red paint job and silver stallion badge flashing from the haze. mirages rise from the engines emitted by the silver pantheons from a rolls royce or the idle hums off a cadillac's pointed grille between bright arched headlights upon the paved earth. the warmth in this space, the performance of cloud rap threaded among these sounds as if to weave them in harmony, did it feel that god's presence was here among the crowds whose dark faces dripped into the silvery air, natural as rainfall on pavement, headlights off distant cars flickering with long spokes shot along the static-charged night that drew luminous constellations around us. instead of the sepulchral stranger, users of this state seek god as an immanence to the pared earth whether virtual or real, choirs and live events incanting the presence of miracle rather than futile efforts to preserve it. a woman in a a puffer jacket and fanny pack took a microphone, her voice soothed the raptures of engine revs and chatter.

'across the old internet, we have been fed into their networks, us who have been killed and humiliated and all of our retaliations seeming like forever martyrs on the wired, as both the dead and the living. whether slain or entertainers, we were always performing our roles.. our entireties on display like this, so scared of the other we cannot

be, we must not for the end of the world was always within us all along. when we couldn't own our own selves and then our minds but now we can stand within the sensations of the wired, we can become within it'

cheers commenced off the backseats of the cars and the crowd gathered while alleppo nodded, a song on the loudspeakers, static clearing for a virtuoso piano chord while a choir recants a verse calling for this very minute amongst the dust of noise, clearing for the presence, the glory, no more like the crumple of sound from the speakers and their polycarbonate space perforated with thousands of planets where the reverberating core of a subwoofer thumped haloes that folded upon reaching our ears yet still trembled the earth, ruffled into pinstripes amongst the quiet blooming in luminous chord. warmth from whatever light in which the piano's measured key thrummed columns around the choir's revelation. chords descend to welcome a figure to earth even if softened in static bytes,

after the service, alleppo finds the woman on the microphone and approaches her.

'ay, lamana,'

the woman stopped and turned to him, eyes narrow but

she eases herself.

'alleppo, surprised to see you. still walking around with the vanguard team?'

'you know how it is, things is fine but we got our fair share of trouble sometimes.'

'we have our own space now...i just don't see why we have to keep this military charade.'

'sorry. i'm not gonna say it's necessary but we're almost there...'

'this is about the missing persons?'

'yeah, i sent a request about using the cold bath just in case. looks like i need it'

lamana looked away and sighed.

'you're gonna get yourself killed.'

'no i won't.'

'the cold bath is only used for experienced practitioners. removal of standard limits on an os could be fatal.'

‘people are missing there that don’t need to be and i gotta do this’

‘wait...what’s this cold bath?’ i asked. alleppo turned to me, closing his eyes in acceptance of a final procedure and as he opened them. he spoke.

‘the cold bath is something we developed here. you know how a body can sometimes sustain psychological strain or even on-sets of decay creep on the wired? well a cold bath reduces the body temperature and the internal os from overheating which then allows the faster process of information and signals. but we found that we started being able to touch transcendental experiences with it. this is how the service practitioners can divine visits in the afterlife. it’s sorta like what those in the eastern continent were able to do with qi and neija. it’s the wired in its totality.’

‘but she said you could be at risk’

‘that’s right. i will be...and that’s just what has to happen’ he said placing his hand on my shoulder, its grip firm even when he shook me slightly, knowing that he wouldn’t let me fall and i suppose he wanted to leave some motion, some disturbance upon me to which i could remember him. ‘guess this is goodbye, man’

‘no’ lamana then interjected. ‘you won’t go...they will’

i realized that she and alleppo looked at me and i could only tilt my head in confusion.’

‘wha-yo i can’t allow that’ alleppo stepped in front of me.

‘look at you. the past still clouds your judgement. that is dangerous in an accelerated state.’

‘i won’t let anything happen to them’

‘alleppo’ i said. ‘i’ll go’

‘wha-? come on man’

‘it’s alright. let me return the favour. i’ll come back, just for you baby.’ i wink to him and despite himself, he rolls his eyes and knowing the decision’s been made, he only backs up.

‘i’ll whoop your ass if you don’t come back man.’ he chuckled, trying to maintain this rictus if not just to maintain this trust that we had for each other in such a short time, being these two individuals at the two continents so removed from everything while surrounded by it all. i walk with lamana into one of the pillars leading underground.

she only leads and i could hardly ask any other question except for the most pressing one.

'so uh, why'd you change your mind?'

'we would have had to recover those missing people but i had a premonition, to place this with you. when we meet another person we have a base set of trust that expands and contracts given the nature of the relationship. that's what gives each of them their own texture, and living them is just one of many miracles'

we enter the chamber, computer monitors at the far room peel off the walls surrounding several pracitioners. i strip and enter into the bath, the clink of ice cubes and chatters of teeth subside until i could feel each movement of the waves upon my chest.

'you may begin. set your intention to your destination but there may be obstacles for you to face before then.'

'alright...'

i close my eyes and hard boot my os, various windows appear in my vision as i no longer have a body, a maze surrounds me, seeping with inverted silhouettes down the

walls but i realize that despite my lack of a body there was a definite radius underneath me until i realize this slow circulation. neija meridians traced the route of my veins, allowing instances of my contours to appear. floating forward, light engulfs the upside down silhouettes with static that glimmered like a thousand photographs, my memories being such pictures and loops replaying.

'hey!' someone said beside me and i turned to see viper, his form melted in scan-lines but when he got near me, his flak jacket and sunglasses carved the lances of signals comprising his avatar.

'viper?'

'what are you doing here, shrimp? you oughta get up'

'sh-shrimp?'

'yeah shrimp. get up shrimp'

he had no recollection of me whatsoever and as he walked around me, he then swatted his arms around and pushed me, arms moving through but it didn't faze him.

'come on, fight back'

‘you think i can do that in this state? maybe the sunglasses are there to dim your lurid delusions’

‘you gonna keep talking, move, stupid’

as i breathed in, something coiled and at his next strike, the flicker of my arm struck his, as he withdrew, he kicked where my legs would be, a shin carved out to block him, these momentary contacts rippled in the qi circulating until i could move, a beat and another followed as i propelled myself, his jab slid across my vision and i kick at his inner knee, signals firmed into legs, a kick soared before sending viper to the ground. having two legs, i wobbled a little under my soles but i kept them planted. viper laughs wagging his finger looking to me.

‘haha, you got it shrimp’ he said ‘you have to make your own movements in this world...don’t forget that’

‘well try not to get in any trouble’ i tell him as he walks away. maybe to viper, these combat situations seemed so alien to the thousands of rooms and empty streets at the east, suddenly having the continuous frequencies of the wired break into fragments upon his limbs, upon trigger pulls must have enamoured him to it.

as i continue walking, the maze forms itself into corridors, pictures of a distant forest. here one of the missing person's signatures were here but as i turned around, lips fed on the static as eyes and a nose dug themselves into the air in front of me.

'you...' it said.

'who are you?'

'you can see me?'

'kinda hard not to. if i didn't know any better, you trying to scare someone.'

'it has been a long time since someone tried to contact me like this. i never existed to anyone until i came to the wired and now i don't exist again. funny how that turns out.'

'these data signatures are from missing people, might you have something to do with it?' i ask but the air remains empty. instead a knock on the door gets my attention to see both kunakida and fauux.

'hey, we got somewhere to be!'

'right...'

getting the data signature within my os, i follow them, kunakida and fauux had conversations about their everyday, something about a test or part-time work. had they imagined that they could carve these serene lives in the wired that they saw looping footage of within servers, maintaining those worlds within kunakida's smile, fauux's face shifting its blocks.

'say, what do you think will happen tomorrow?' kunakida asked.

'i'm not too sure...' fauux responded.

'right, it seems that way doesn't it...'

'yes. well, we must be going now.'

'yes. it is time' she agrees before they walk down separate hallways and seeing their receding forms i could only see this be too common in the flits of users around and i shout.

'wait!'

both of them turned around and as i raised my hand, it shone in the glow of the sunset from the windows, the trees a splotch of ink, my message to them.

‘we’ll see each other again, right?’

they peer at each other and fauux nods and kunakida does too. this kind of gesture was at least something i could’ve paid them given that we see each other as often as we did, even if it was a merely just to pass the days but it made each of our encounters their own, like its own psycho-sphere, the lands in which we grew our perceptions around.

the second data signature burns in front of me and reaching out with my hand, it encircles my arm, the face surfacing yet again.

‘i had to appear...i had no choice...nothing had weight on the wired, even with a full transfer, but i couldn’t simply leave my body as is. this body, always exposed to someone, for someone to look at, to live in that apartment, to be on a record. it was only until i could make a body within the wired...the perishability of a body gave it signal strength... even here, the only things that matter are the things that don’t last and the static feeds off of them.’

while i contemplated their words i walk towards a door and open it, entering a grey triage space like alleppo’s only one figure stood, her hair flowed down her back, obscur-

ing the logo of her leather jacket before she turned her head to the side, her glance, like i always outside of it all along but never too far away, as she was with me.

'foxtel'

'wh-you recognize me?'

'of course, why wouldn't i?

'nah, i just thought...'

'it's alright, i know who you are' she said as i walk beside her looking at the grey surface, little imprints of white pool across it like rain or better yet passersby. 'you've been with me when we were kids, producer introduced us at tai shu. our rivers and lakes met same moon. even when hanzhou's saber cut into me, you were still there'

'i watched it from my room, yeah.'

'no...you were there with me...all along'

i had watched the castle forest raid on a stream as one of the audience members in the server and when i saw her cut down, i only shrank back but tried moving within the space of the lobby, even as i was on different server not

actually present there i wanted to be there to help her somehow and just when i thought this, hanzhou turned to see saturna appear behind him, her wo dao sword cleaved down his chest, appearing so unexpectantly like she always did.

‘ i guess i was...’

she reached out her fingers fell where my face would be but flesh soon poured in robes to her touch, my face appearing out of the static.

‘i’ll see you back, right?’ she said.

‘i said it too much’

she smiled and as i close my eyes, she disappears within the leaves of electric signals as part of the world. the last data signature carves itself in the light and in its flame, my body warmed, electric signals pooled within my meridians yet my limbs moved with little interference or even the slight lags of static trying to complete the movement. however, the face returns lips seared into the air as its mouth opened. while it caught me by surprise, i was expecting some kind of encounter and i jump back, a step transfer takes me out of its fire burning up the grey surfaces.

‘your body shall do nicely. soon, i will return to the real world’

i open my hand, the vp70 appears within it, fingers embrace the grip while i pull the trigger, smoke parts through the face that dissipates before its flesh tries to enwrap me in it, memories from a room flash in my mind but in a single breath, my contours reify themselves, ridding the blue flesh on me as it burns up again. each shot only scatters them and when hesitation plucked at me, the room goes dark and as the face glowed again, its lips curdles with flesh, eyes domed but before its iris topped it, lights eviscerate it entire as several figures with assault rifles stood at each corner fired, each etching a flame around them until the shooting stopped. a slow light faded into the triage space once again and several individuals in body armour appeared, wearing the fatigues of the vanguard team, the face nowhere to be seen.

‘a-alleppo?’

‘nah,’ they said. ‘you aight, young buck?’

‘y-yeah…’ i said. ‘how did you…’

‘we heard the signal of an exfil cord, alleppo’s. we came as

soon as we could.'

'but...are you practitioners?'

'not that either...you gotta go a few planes above that.'

'you're from the spirit world...'

'and so the plane has landed' another laughed.

'yeah...alleppo managed to survive way back in the day, we were cut off from our real bodies but soon, they had given us a proper burial. i suppose it was our time...but i know he's still hurting...'

'that's why he wanted to come here'

'he wanted to come here?'

'yeah...to see you'

'man, alleppo's the same as always. big softie he was' one of the other individuals laughed.

'it's all good, that's just how he is...in fact, he visited us whenever before they decided that they didn't want our psyches to decay and therefore let us pass on.' the individual said before they gathered the team preparing to re-en-

ter the spirit world within smoke. 'well, tell alleppo we said what's up...aight? say, rabbit has hopped the moon'

'aight' i said waving to them as they returned the gesture and proceed to log out the internal os, a chill ran through from the water i was still immersed in but i didn't get up, fearing that shots of cold would attack me once i did.

'yo' alleppo said while the ministers watched me still in the bath. 'you gonna get up or...'

'man, i'm not gonna break into a conniption once i get up, i got frail health...'

'what you worried we gonna see you naked or something?'

'no, it's just...'

'alright out the pool' he said as he and lemana lifted me out of the pool, covering me with a towel, my internal os' interface comes online smooth, not leaving any traces of light across my vision.

'oh, the data signatures, all the missing persons should be here' i said as i gave the triage programs to alleppo. 'also uh...i have a message for you from some friends...the rabbit has jumped the moon'

alleppo stares at me a moment before correcting me.

‘it’s hopped the moon, ma. hopped.’

‘aight aight’

‘still...thanks...’

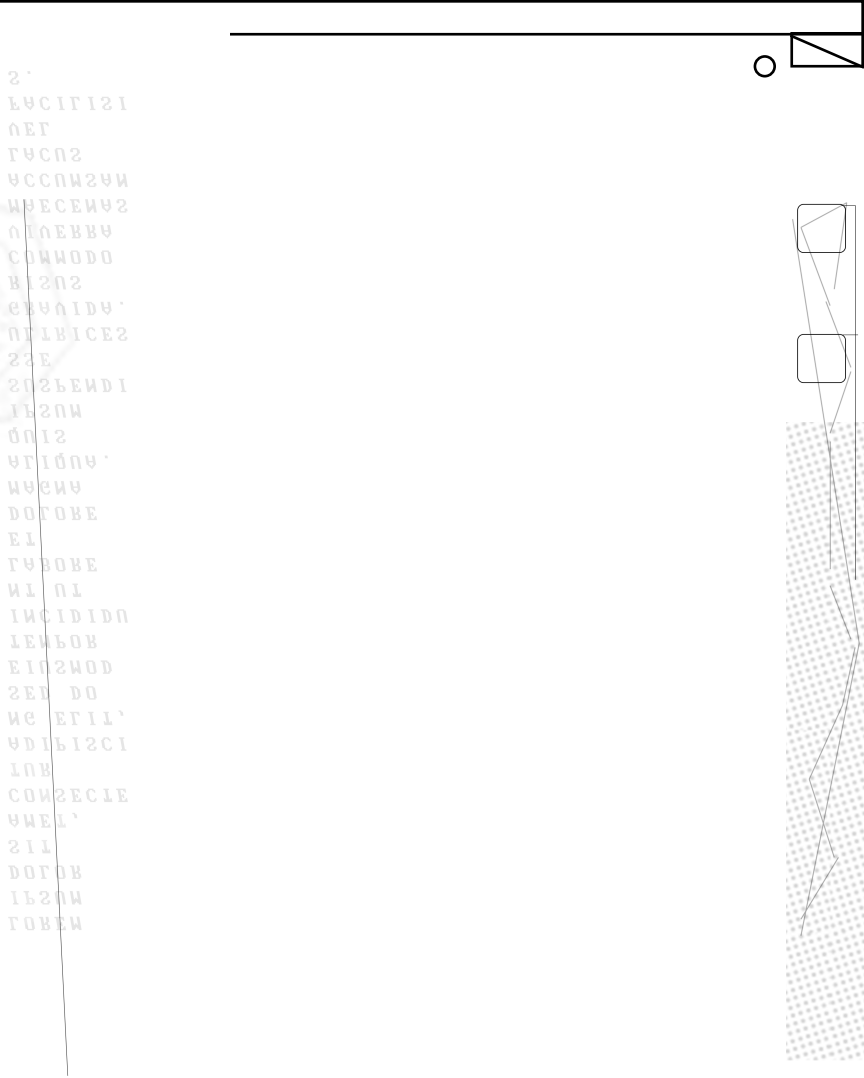
‘you got it.’

lemana then came back from one of the monitors as she forwarded some info on our os.

‘turns out the face was a user who cut themselves off through a full-transfer. wasn’t long until they couldn’t return to their body though. we’ll have the church find their body and give it a proper burial. it’s the least we can do, for those that live and die...’

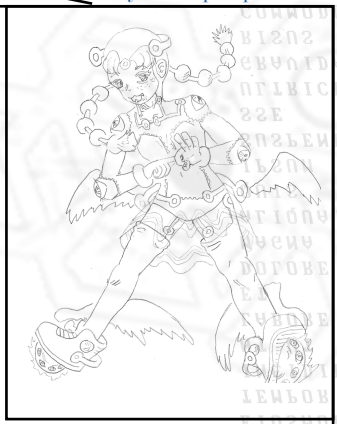
the story of this user seemed all too familiar. on the wired, it seemed everyone could suddenly be a version of themselves that was everything they could have been and even here, it seemed they could’ve also taken that to the real world, appearing in its fleeting moments only to stumble, delaying time and time again. i had only hoped that they could be that person they could be in the afterlife and i place my hand in front, pointed upward, offering my re-

spects to them, this gesture at least the one thing i could offer them. we step out into the church again, watching the signals move across the mural, engine revs rolled within the dome, etches of paint and stone, the materials of these figures within it just as static was comprising of those worlds we glimpsed even here on earth.



it's a good thing the DARK LORD is a shut-in!

by: baroquespiral



Name: Smilia Miyoenra

Birthday: N/A

Sex: female (by calling)

Blood type: N/A

Likes: angelic artificial materials, cake pops, long pillows, exposition with plastic models, funny faces, conflict resolution, body heat, people who won't accept help (in a cool way)

Dislikes: torture, people who won't accept help (in an uncool way), walking, organic food textures, storms, succu-devils

Seen with: Astig Tsuzan, Azamiel Kelvoth

Theme song: Nanahira & Reol - Electric Angel

Legacy doctrines - beliefs no longer considered canon or orthodox by the Ecclesia, but not considered heretical either such as angels and demons and heaven and hell and heavenly archons, formerly accepted for long enough to work their

way into custom and cultural memory - have proved an inexhaustible resource for pop culture, particularly the deliberately degraded branch of it known by the Silmenon neologism "otaku". Few have exploited (and reshaped) this resource as systematically as Shunny Najda.

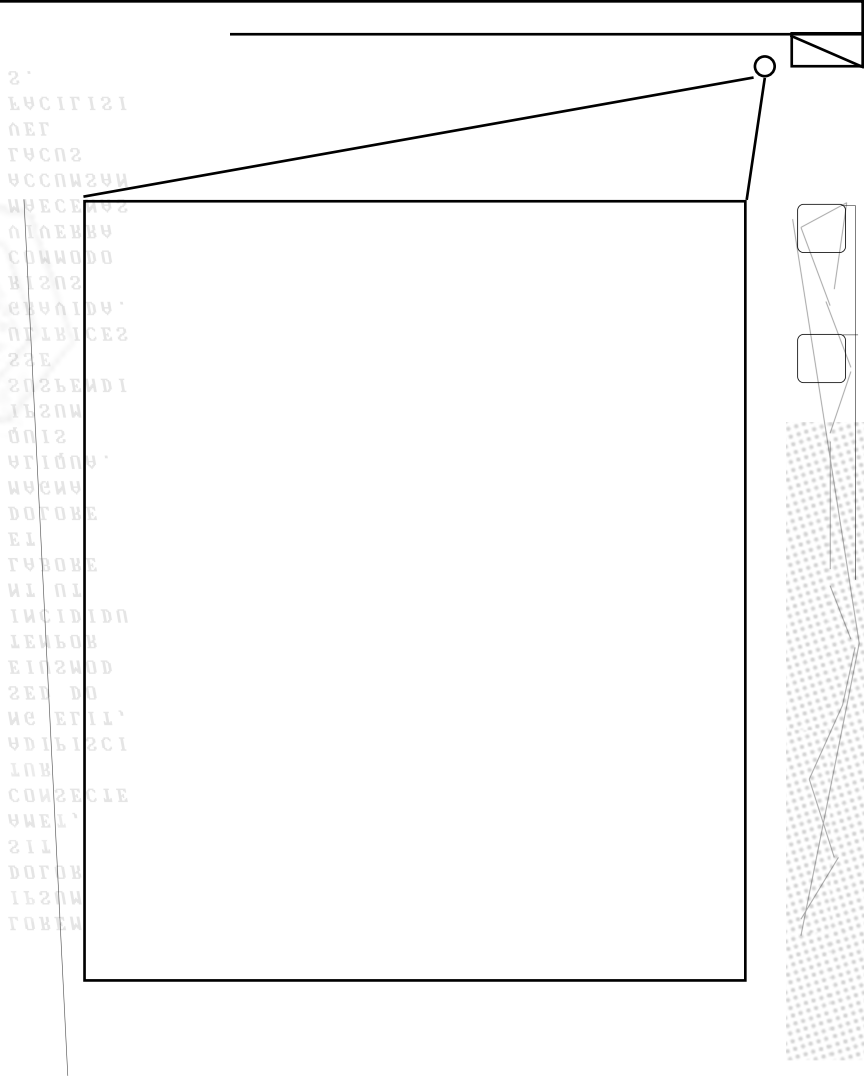
When she first appeared in Hell Harrowing there was a small moral panic over the "succu-angel" Smilia - such a thing would have been considered flatly heretical when angels were an official belief, so it couldn't rightfully claim the protection of a legacy doctrine, conservatives argued. Shunny Najda, unfazed, would respond to the controversy in the text of Hell Harrowing itself, first with winking one-liners, then with genuine pathos in an arc where her own existence is debated by a heavenly tribunal that many queer viewers would later claim as inspirational. The legacy of Smilia Miyoenra is, however, like much of Hell Harrowing,

hotly debated in the fandom. She is the second girl who falls on the misanthropic Astig from the sky; she is sent from heaven to assuage his loneliness, which is distorting the labyrinth at the first level of hell around both him and Azamiel, at a point where neither of them are ready to admit their feelings for each other. Philosophically the concept of an angel whose function is attached to a need so individual as lust or even emotional intimacy is problematic for much the same reason as it would have been heretical when angels were actually believed in. Najda navigated this deftly enough through the series to justify her presence on grounds of artistic merit in the first circuit of the International Poets' Court (setting the precedent for a wave of imitations nowhere near as sophisticated). On one hand, Smilia's erotic role is her own choice, but within the theoretical bounds of her domain as an angel of emotional growth. It is, simultaneously, the product of society's failures: her adoption of succubus technologies and techniques was permitted under the aegis of an experimental angel division that was shuttered and

covered up after their function was abused by their superiors. In the penultimate episode, she threatens heaven with an appeal to the highest Goddess reminiscent of the text of Pistis Eurynomoea.

Yet she is the representative of a form of love Astig must eventually outgrow - indeed, she understands it as her function, though she never fulfills that in the way she hoped either - and that she is the Dark Lord's "waifu" is, according to our psychologists (General Martolod himself was present for the writing of a few episodes of Hell Harrowing), a good sign that he is as regressed as we need him to be. But it is also a worrying sign of stubbornness. Her "embarrassing purity" is the most entertainingly written in the genre - genuinely human and novel at every occurrence, as well as formally baroque in the lengths to which Najda's writing will got to make theoretical erotic knowledge clash with practical erotic knowledge clash with genuine erotic interest in a way that twists around three or four times in an interaction. She is also the orga-

nizing case study of an acclaimed psychological textbook on sensory sensitivities and the rubber fetish.





Synopsis

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy. social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.

Last Time

luskonneg experiments on his own consciousness in hopes of recovering a narrative worth sharing with a connoisseur of bizarre narratives, while an unknown enemy sows distrust behind the lines of the containment operation

CW: alcohol, drug aftereffects, social anxiety, rape fantasy (as victim), exhibitionist fantasy, cleaning anxiety, food waste, male gaze, mind sharing kink, pedophilic ideation, false accusation anxiety, sex toys, dirt/mess, cannabis, insects, thought-reality causation, separation

It was early afternoon. Contour was empty - not open yet. Braz had entered not as a customer, but as a military investigator, with the customary death's hand knock. But she had slumped down at the bar, where Uñuez was checking her inventory, with the expression of someone who had just lost a lover, a job, a parent, or their self-respect - or all at once.

Uñuez had poured a white tea gin just out of courtesy. Braz hardly touched it.

"Tell me honestly." Braz had pinned Uñuez's hand - warmly and softly enough to still be friendly; tactically, inescap-

ably enough to be threatening - "Did Lacriz Aeeth know beforehand I would be there that night?"

Uñuez laughed gently, performing that method-actress ignorance to the nature of the situation she was in that had gotten her through so many more dangerous than a guilty Rraihha Braz. "Oh, goodness! I'm genuinely, unbelievably sorry, I thought they might be your type but not to this extent - that you'd either lose your precautionary rigour around them, or get so flustered you'd think you did! To be clear, it's not the first time that's happened here, or been cleared up. Knowing you, I hope and wouldn't be surprised if it's the latter, although I know nothing of the situation you're responding to and imagine I never will. You didn't really… go up there and confess something *confidential*, did you?"

Not *really*. Not like that. Something so secret they'd never think of to explicitly prohibit. But referencing several confidential things, either way.

Braz looked awkward in a way Uñuez had never seen her. It almost seemed too exaggerated for this kind of passionate, chivalrous, entirely conventional military scandal. "*I'm* sorry for involving you in a line of investigation that still seems insane to me. If it's true the fault is mine, but

it should... still be almost impossible for them to be involved in the thing I'm thinking of in the way I'm thinking of, and I hope there's something simpler I'm overlooking. On the other hand, it should be almost impossible for anyone else."

That is, it should be almost impossible for magic to operate on thoughts.

Even improvised magic, or the wild magic Shaïgnar's familiars used, didn't spring from their thoughts, but the movements they made in accordance with an instinct or law that humans could no longer access.

Today's magic theorists understood there was nothing inherently exceptional about thoughts that made them impossible to use as magical substrates. They were not, as had once been supposed, pure expressions of the Will of the Goddess that could not be placed on the same plane as material creations - a model that had caused innumerable theological problems. They were material facts like any other - exchanges of electrochemical signals in the brain. The fact that they had taken so long to identify as such was the problem. Thoughts were far too complex, too subtle, too varied, to define as substrates. Defining them as effects - as in the buffs on the Dark Lord - had already been

a major breakthrough, though improvised magicians had reportedly been achieving them for thousands of years. Those were extremely general, affecting total domains of cognitive function as defined and refined over centuries of psychological research.

"Do you have any idea where they might be?"

"Impossible for anyone else... you mean like in terms of information, or abilities? If that's not too much for you to say."

Braz narrowed her eyes, trying to keep her thoughts from being submerged by the mob of screaming mouths erupting from the bloody pulp at the back of her skull. "*Abilities*?"

"Oh, I don't just mean in bed. I'm sure they're good - yes, I'm sure they're *that* good - but they might know some rare magic from Voidhanger Abbey too. Or did they not talk about that?"

Braz had a poker face that wouldn't break under torture, but the elevator dropping in her stomach was the most stress she'd ever had to subject it to. "Wait, when you said they were a priest I thought you meant at some local par-

ish. They went to *Voidhanger Abbey*?"

"So you didn't get the full story." Uñuez frowned. She would feel bad if she had been a piece in someone's spy operation - but she really hadn't had any idea herself Braz would be there that night. "What *did* they tell you?"

"Someone important to them died... They entered the priesthood only thinking about death, and left it more interested in the spark of life..." She was only remembering abstractions, and it wouldn't have to have been any magic in spite of Uñuez's wards, because it was a social engineering technique, the abstractions had taken up all the memorable structural points in the flow. "They were at Romarosa before, in..."

"Theoretical Mysteries. The death, at least, you can corroborate. If you really want to know more about them, look into what happened in the Theoretical Mysteries department in 3384 - maybe someone like you will be able to find something out that a regular person like me can't."

"Was it... suspicious?"

"Not in itself, an open-and-shut suicide, but one of their star professors was let go at the same time."

Braz tapped on the table distractedly. "...how did you know them before?"

"They spent a month here visiting from Romarosa, searching for some obscure text. On behalf of the professor who was let go."

Braz's eyes flashed. "Was it a magic text? Was it Dark? I know you don't forget these things."

Uñuez wrinkled her eyes. "It was a transcription of an obscure Druid poem. You know how those are - they don't exactly have titles, not the kind you can remember."

Druid poems, Voidhanger Abbey - an institution that taught not only the doctrines and sacraments of Silmenon clerics, but the rhi techniques of Miwa monasticism, and integrated them in prayer and asceticism. Lacriz Aeeth's domain of curiosity seemed much broader than the old romantic rites they claimed had sparked their interest - they seemed to have feelers in all the outlying realms of magic and theology at once. That was what a Mysteries researcher did, but.

Even to enter at the undergraduate level of a Mysteries program, one had to pass a whole gauntlet of psychologi-

cal tests. The qualifications for higher degrees were comparable to those for the upper tiers of security clearance. A suicide in a Mysteries program, by itself, would have been a scandal. The professor might have been fired not for any involvement but simply for failing to prevent it. Because if they couldn't see the warning signs of that, they might not see the warning signs of someone going Dark either.

Uñuez' eyes widened. She floated over to and opened another cabinet - "You know, it's possible I have it still..." - and disentangled several complex wards with a scissor-shaped spell-key she pulled from a pouch hidden a hand's depth under her conservative, square, silk-ruffled hem. Braz pulled her shoulders up and stiffened. Why hadn't she asked for this before? Uñuez hadn't suggested... Uñuez had trusted... but she couldn't blame anyone but herself.

Five shelves crammed close with bottles and flasks of every conceivable shape - not that different at a glance from the wines, ales, nectars, obscure foreign liquors that lined the normally visible ones, except for the uniform indexing system of handwritten, dated tags. Scanning the tags until she found the right shelf and reaching delicately around at the back, Uñuez pulled out a tiny, diamond-shaped phi-

al of emerald liquid. She held it out briefly to Braz, then before Braz could gather the faith in herself to accept, pulled it back, popped the yellow-white marble stopper and threw back a shot.

Her pupils widened and shrank. Her hand hung half-open in the air as she spoke.

"*The Structure unfolds by day,*

And the Reign imposes by night,

But in the glittering half-light

The eyes of the Regulator

Blink like fireflies…"

They widened, and shrank, and fixed Braz's, and winced, as Braz began the memory-wiping paces around the edge of the bar - "oh…"

Strictly speaking, the abject failure of his drug experiment gave Luskonneg an excuse not to respond to the journalist's texts. He had tested himself to see whether he might

have any story worthy of the name, and even if the test had succeeded he wasn't sure he could have done it. Going ahead in spite of the negative result would mean he was *trying* to, he *wanted* to, and one that was humiliating, why would he *want* to tell hundreds, thousands of people about his pathetic life - well, he did on Feed, but there he was selecting his own audience of people like him - and two, admitting he was trying at something would throw his entire decision-making equilibrium into shambles.

Once he had that distance on it, Luskonneg could face the objective facts of the event: it was really fucking funny.

Absurd, which was his favourite kind of funny. (The years he'd spent worrying he might be Dark because of that...) The way the journalist had appeared, like a mysterious fighting girl in an anime... The idea that she wanted to interview him about - not even being a NEET, because she didn't know he was one! just some kind of unspecified weirdo. If he thought about it that way, that was probably why he seemed interesting in a way the specified kinds, quietly cared for by their respective social services, weren't. Maybe just a NEET wouldn't be that interesting anyway...

Right. How would he explain this without admitting he

had gone outside - a betrayal to at least 30% of his followers?

Actually, hadn't he already almost done this with @Suburbophile?

(He had already pretty much forgotten his mutual's weird powerword and defaulted back to the handle that appeared on his Feed every day, but that ghostly face, frozen in the moment of its breaking smile just before everything went wrong, appeared superimposed over the screen whenever he read a post, making it hard to focus on them.)

Maybe if everything had gone perfectly they would have talked it through to the same conclusions and kept it on the downlow - there was no real reason to believe they wouldn't have - but the morning leading up to their rendezvous, when he'd pictured it idly it had been in the completely alien register of everydays he knew from media, taking pictures of their meal and posting it, somehow knowing an angle that wouldn't cast distorting shadows across their faces...

In any case - @Suburbophile knew about November Thistle.

That didn't mean he needed to know about the ways Luskonneg kept humiliating himself there (once was enough). Those were... also funny, but not in the way he liked to make himself online, even when he was making fun of himself. The @moephrenology brand - the person @Suburbophile seemed to admire - was someone whose withdrawal was an act of deep dignity and self-control. There were people who made fools of themselves in public, some even who managed to get away with it and live rewarding lives in the heights of government, business, entertainment - @moephrenology declined to be one of them.

But he had already been planning to massage the story somehow if he posted about it. A simple *>tfw so NEET a journo wants to write a story about it (I don't talk to opps)*

would probably parse as a joke (which might detract from how funny it honestly was) and if not, the assumption would probably be that they found him off Feed itself.

Which plugged into another line of paranoia he'd compartmentalized - what if she knew his Feed already? That would explain the absurd coincidence of it; he'd heard about one time an anonymous poster had released a breakthrough magical proof on Feed and a journalist had

triangulated them through clues in their posting to get an interview, just like a Punkin Patch user; with Dark or criminal posting they had direct access to government tracking, not that he'd gotten mixed up in anything like that. If she just monitored deep otaku Feed - which seemed likely if she was researching this, not that he had a clear idea what category she mapped him to - she might easily be following him, or someone who followed him, or have seen his posts. He had used this anxiety as an excuse to sift through all 1400 of his followers, blocking ones that seemed suspicious or just inactive.

The part of him that still wanted to respond saw this as a positive. Maybe he could get a whole chain reaction of things happening without him trying. (Usually the trope was just one or two thing happening without trying, and at some point the main character had to "accept the call" or whatever, although Shunny Najda had tried to push this boundary in one of his last works, *GoodBad LuckMan*, which hadn't been well-received by the plebs.) Maybe she would blackmail him with the threat of telling the internet, his only refuge, what had really happened. Maybe she would do more with the blackmail than just get an interview. Maybe she would get his address, come to his apartment and break all his limbs except for one hand and rape

him and hack his phone so it could only text her number while he finally starved to death like he deserved.

(That wasn't even a doujin he had read. He had blocked it out panel by panel in his head over a month once. The woman in it had looked a bit like her.)

At some point (five days after recovering from the drugs, which had him shivering too much to do much more than refresh and like for another three, and then the indecision generated such a deep pit in his stomach it felt like he was falling back into that unrecovered state again), the pressure built up to the point that he just fired off the post, half-understanding that if that didn't bring the pressure of the anxiety back down, he would just delete it, and it would even out.

Almost immediately @Suburbophile replied - not, as he'd expected, under the post, but reopening the DM they hadn't touched since their plans had fallen through.

I get why you'd hold that principle in general, but if this real you really should think about doing it. If there's anyone could describe the real world of people like us, the things newspapers don't get across, it's you. I really think that haha

The message felt like getting someone's accidental text to the wrong number.

The messages from the journalist themselves, even, didn't necessarily feel that way - they belonged to his life in their cruelty, their comedy, their lack of explanation. This was simply a misunderstanding, a message to a self that didn't exist and he had been making so long he had forgotten existed.

The @moephrenology that existed on Feed spoke for a "people like us". He had been using 2den so much longer than Feed anyway, where he wasn't even an "us" or a "people", just "anon", that when he started putting the best jokes he made in his head hours after a thread autodeleted on a Feed account, he still instinctively spoke in the voice of all anonymous, even when he belatedly hammered humiliating events from his first couple years on his own into a shape that could bear laughter without collapsing.

But the half-conscious effort he put into coming across as a general type of a shut-in - which in retrospect had to be what Llau admired, anyway, the idea that they had made some kind of connection that wouldn't fall apart in fifteen minutes offline was cope - was precisely to hide the fact that he knew he wasn't. No one in their right mind could

generalize from him. Being a shut-in worked for him at least because it was one he couldn't fail out of, that would never be too good for him. Nothing he did could offend his sense of himself as a shut-in, as long as he didn't waste any of his time on normie crap. But he knew he was wrong even for a shut-in. And another advantage of being one was nobody needed to know that.

Llau didn't need to know that. He'd leave this on read, Llau would assume he was reading too much into a shitpost, and he'd go back to interacting with Luskonneg's avatar (Smilia's facial model, each line annotated with measurements).

His mask?

Oh Goddess - had he created a mask? Not just like a normie - like the normies who were too wrong even for normies, the ones they made after school specials about?

Too shut-in for a shut-in and too normie for a normie - he was wrong in every direction it was possible to be wrong in. He should just end it all.

Or just tell Llau.

Tell him what? His entire life story?

Well, somebody else was asking for that.

Arguing more with the terrifying new mistake forming in his head, he began to type: *I really don't think you want to read that like you think you do*

>it's too little and too much at the same time

He could see what was wrong with what he'd written as soon as it was in the box in front of him.

What, was he writing cover copy for a BellSoft game?

He had to humiliate himself, the longer he didn't the closer he brought himself to humiliating himself for real. But then, hadn't this already been a positive feedback loop of humiliating himself?

>"too little and too much at the same time" see, that's exactly what they don't get!

>yeah but you can't make everyone get things by explaining them. I like Feed because if someone doesn't get me they can just ignore me.

>that's true of news too. if someone doesn't like the article they can flip the page.

He didn't have to seriously defend all these excuses, did he? If someone tried to argue with him that he should strip naked in the middle of the street, he might not know how to defend against that either.

Oh, *that's* a pretty hot doujin premise.

>it isn't necessarily better if they do. like my mom might read this.

>holy shit it's that big?

Come to think of it, he actually still had no idea how big this story was supposed to be, or how big a news platform (why was Llau picturing a physical paper?) it was supposed to run with.

>how did this even come up?

>uhhh long story

...wow. It was that simple?

They stopped for a while. Then hours later, his DM notifi-

cation lit up again.

>*what kind of interview?*

The messages were vague. He couldn't tell if she knew what she wanted even, really - "feel free to tell me anything about yourself you think might surprise me" - "you know how Porthole works right?" (Porthole was the encrypted video conferencing app exclusive to licensed journalists and therapists. He knew it from therapists.) "you don't have to enter your own ID if you sign the waiver, although I'll be obligated to confirm it if we run with a story, and even within the government it's completely confidential unless you say something mandatory reportable. and I have a journeyman's investigation license, so I can bypass mandatory reporting if a superior signs off on it"…. "sorry if all this is a lot, ha ha >< I get that you probably don't think you have anything important to talk about. but that's what I want to talk about, if that makes sense?" Of course it didn't, how did someone this spaced out get an investigation license?

>*ohhhhh I'd be nervous about video too haha*

First he had a mask, now he was "nervous". What was he, a little *tsundere* schoolgirl from a coming of age comedy? He

had *stage fright*, and was talking to his *best friend* about it. The dissonance between this scenario the way it sounded in words and his reality felt like a coat of grime.

He noted his silent disgust with himself, noted the humour in it, and wondered if there was some way to justify it as a joke. At peace with this thought as closure he tabbed over to the first episode of a mysterious new seasonal with a star-studded staff he'd had his eye on, *The Clover Association*.

The equinox had passed without so much as a grey whisper to him, snow still on the roofs, a flood of art of girls in various Equinoctian festival dresses, Silmenon and Klauxion especially, but barely any that would even hint at the celebrations supposedly outside somewhere, with their cumbersome snow hoods that looked out of season in other countries (except from Llau, who collected all the art of traditional Elthazan fashion he could find that wasn't from trad weirdos). Spring season was starting.

Hours later he realized Llau hadn't ended the conversation at the same time:

>*actually on that note I've been thinking*

>since we never properly got to meet up that time

>and idk when I'm gonna be in Winter City again

>would you like to. video call some time

>I mean it could be like.

>practice

His first thought was, had Llau been watching *The Clover Association* too? It had been about something like this. Four anonymous losers - a shut-in like himself, a sex addict, a bipolar person with a dozen suicide attempts and a traumatized kid who tried to kill their parents - are selected for the trial of a private, exclusive thought-linking spell called Clover.

For that matter, his "journalist" probably wanted to do something like this. If it had been a better show, maybe he'd be able to force himself to follow through.

His model of Llau would be significantly off if Llau liked it either. It was stiff and shot like live-action TV - every staff member he'd recognized had animated better on shows that weren't aiming for this kind of "prestige". The kid and the sex addict were clearly designed for a safe sort of

"moe" appeal as if by someone who had never really experienced that and only grasped it on the level it was joked about on the mainstream internet or haphazardly written up in the kinds of articles Llau wanted him to correct.

Maybe *The Clover Association* was why Llau was so insistent that he *correct the record* on shut-ins?...

But he wasn't as confident as Llau that there was a record to correct. That was what he had already run his experiment on, after all. Anything that wasn't obvious about a life like his, he got out on Feed.

Everything else - dissolved in the grey stomach acid of indifferent memory, knowledge ground into the hard sediment of a timeless database, experience into soft mush deposited down the garbage chute of nonexistence.

His present stayed eternally young by eating its past. If he could only do the same thing with physical objects, his room would be clean.

Clean room.

Video call.

He couldn't. But - if that was why he couldn't -

If he couldn't even show someone who was like him - the people he spent all day, every day, proving he wasn't worse than - (not like *that*, he despised those people from Punkin Patch who made up for their pathetic lives by gawking at people *worse* than them, by telling themselves they were *better* than someone, and worse still, rubbing shoulders and sucking up to their own betters, the genuine normies with upstanding bureaucratic positions and families he knew were among them from the Punkin Leaks five years ago) - the way he lived, his ground would collapse. He would be forced to either go up or down again, and he had never felt less capable of going up, and there was nowhere to go down...

No, wait, calm down. That's not the problem. @Suburbophile - Llau de Xiau - didn't necessarily have the realistic unspoken understanding of their common condition that he was treating as his "ground", after all. The only person who *wanted* to go on a video call with him - *and look at that* - was someone who obviously, to some extent - (the words were blocked several times by flurries of outraged denial before he could finish the thought) - idolized him.

Plus, he lived with his parents - he might not have any idea what a real shut-in's living space looked like.

What did the shut-in's apartment in *The Clover Association*, he found himself thinking, look like anyway?

Luskonneg still didn't want to watch the show, and spent almost twice the length of the first episode looking for screencaps.

In the first five minutes of the episode, he had to pause eight or nine times to feel bad about wasting his time looking for a screencap and not having been skilled enough at searching to find the right one and how there was still time if he thought of the right key word right now to not waste another twenty or fifteen but there wouldn't be in another five minutes, or ten...

There was nothing else he was good at, if he had to take a whole twenty-four minutes watching an anime he wouldn't like to find a frame to prove a point to himself...

A few weeks ago he would have felt proud of his detective's thoroughness, his willingness to watch twenty-four minutes of bad anime to prove a point. Why was he so antsy these days. Why was he trying to prove this point in the first place.

What point was he trying to prove.

He found he couldn't string it together in a sentence any more. His mind would just stop like a Panopticon video loading when he had too many tabs open.

But he knew something would reassure (or... the other thing... what would happen if it didn't) him when he got to a good shot of Jhossan (the character like him)'s room.

You would have thought that would be within the first five minutes anyway. An establishing shot or something.

Was the show actually good or bad, anyway?

What did he remember of the first five minutes?

Grinding his back teeth until they could provide a ground and referent to what he was feeling, he pulled the time bar steadily back, stimming on the viscous smoothness of the reversed movements and retracing the beats of the narrative.

He released and let it roll forward on the shot of tabs deleting across Jhossan's glasses he had to admit was pretty good, and caught a single cutaway that was almost too fast to screenshot himself - Jhossan (in that stupid hoodie with the thumb holes, something he couldn't wear inside

even in winter without it becoming a sweatbath, another expression of the design principle he had pegged at first glance, and yet he almost fell for until he focused on the garish neon zigzag cuff lines) in the bottom left corner of an overhead dutch angle, slats of light falling through wide blinded windows across half-open tankobon, two rickety towers of TV dinner and instant noodle boxes standing next to a bulky computer tower (a fan server they ran for some idol group, if Luskonneg remembered the post about it correctly, even though the government had started licensing those in the commune of Silmenon where it was set...)

Luskonneg stood up, turned around, tried to picture his room at the same angle relative to the position where he would usually be sitting up on his futon, stained quilt twisted around his knees.

He didn't have any tankobon - he read all his manga online. The animators had obviously been too lazy to cover the beige autofill gradient walls with anything like his posters, even though the idol otaku he followed were the most obsessive shrine-decorators he knew, and would have ripped on the state of his if they'd seen them, falling loose at corners and torn at bottom edges and covered up by

dozens of cheap bug-wards he'd bought since the cockroach encounter, Preserving beads languishing at third or quarter positions on their string circuits. Nor for that matter the tessellated carpet of flyers, packages, tissues, announcements and complaints (about what? but they were months old) from building management on the floor. It would take a really brilliant background artist, maybe like the team from Cloud Castle Dreadnoughts, or Hell Hospital, to do justice to a real shut-in's room.

And Jhossan, he realized with a wince, at least finished their meals even if they didn't throw out the packaging.

(A bowl of charred rice he'd been gingerly crunching on in the mornings, a pinch at a time, like cereal.)

(Rainbow ice cream that had melted into a sinkhole around the embedded spoon, then formed a skin.)

(Chips embedded in crystals of hardening relish - why had he thought that would be a good idea again?)

But that was just another arbitrary inconsistency in the imagination of someone who'd never lived like this, right?

An easy way to test that would be to post it - anonymously,

of course, so he wouldn't - what was he scared of again - what was he testing again - what the *fuck* was he so antsy about?

When are you not, he ribbed himself - and then realized his memory had drained into not one but two timeless tableaux that seemed to simultaneously describe the same sedimented time: a torture-cube of indistinguishable physical and psychic agony, compressing and transpiercing him at all times - and a painless, weightless peace that was all he could ever dream of, the condition of angels skimming anonymous information like sea-birds, glints of whimsy occasionally surfacing on the waves of boredom.

Imagine that in an anime - a split frame establishing shot - but how would they differ?...

He skimmed through the rest of the episode for more details and Yirilin's bath scene. Actually, he was sort of lucky *The Clover Association* was dumb enough to show any of it. Extrapolating from his idea of the two different boxes, he'd realized that if he was directing, he wouldn't show Jhossan's surroundings at all, only a haze of grainy interference patterns. Or maybe he'd only show it when someone else looked in, through the Clover link - not that he was paying enough attention to say for sure if that was

how the Clover link worked - wait, somebody was narrating peeking over Yirilin's streaming shoulders, mentally looking away before it got to any of the good parts...

A doujin idea: what if the link was completely involuntary and active at all times? His mind split into two boxes again: comfort and terror. In one box, the only justifiable way to share sexual experience; in the other, eternal rape. (Didn't Llau read some ethics kink stuff?)

>you still

>interested?

I never said I was in the first place. He almost typed that. But he had just been thinking about the Clover link, permanent and involuntary.

This wouldn't be that. The very fact that he was worrying about what Llau would think, depending on what he would say, was how he knew it couldn't be that. In fact, he didn't even worry about what @Suburbophile would think when he posted on Feed. Or anyone else. What would happen if that went away?

>did you ever follow @crispykittens? After three minutes,

Luskonneg typed the thought that stuck as he deliberated, or rather, tried to probe the cloudy waters where the objects of deliberation refused to surface.

>*I think I might have seen you Regurg them a few times, back when I first met you?* Luskonneg wasn't sure for a moment whether "met" meant "followed" or "was followed back" here; there was a good half a year between. No, wait - @crispykittens had deleted within that half-year. *Why?*

Luskonneg was thinking out loud. He couldn't stop himself. He was treating it like a reply thread even though it was already more. *We had a falling out over whether the Angel Thieves were right in Sugar Matic Fortune Casters and he unfollowed me. When I got banned I just made my new account and followed him again and he didn't know it was me.*

>*oh my Goddess. everyone on Panopticon used to hate Sugar Matic Fortune Casters just for the designs and didn't even get to the part with one of the best moral dilemmas in the history of fiction*

>*why are you asking though*

He hadn't allowed himself to complete the thought, and now found it unspeakable. *"I didn't lose anything when @*

crispykittens unfollowed me" - aside from several sleepless nights, over a week of failing to starve himself, a vent thread screencapped on Sugar Matic Struggle Feed describing in detail what he'd do to every single Fortune Caster who had opposed the Angel Thieves - *"so I won't lose anything if I turn on the camera and @Suburbophile stops liking me - I won't lose his posts, that is, and it's not like I could operate on the assumption of anything else anyway".*

>I guess what I mean is, it's easier for that kind of thing to happen in conversation, so I'd rather just keep it low stakes if you wanna call. don't think about it as practice for… whatever

>but Sugar Matic Fortune Casters would be low stakes to me! now I'm kinda scared…

He felt like an anvil had been dropped on his head.

>I mean @crispykittens was the biggest fan of it that ever lived. like he had a statistical model proving this. but you're right

>you shouldn't talk to me if I make you scared

>I shouldn't talk about scary things

>like feelings

>or conflicts

>or journalists

>or Sugar Matic Fortune Casters

The "@Suburbophile is typing" ellipsis went on. As and after he typed.

And on.

And on.

And on.

Then it stopped for three hours.

Luskonneg was lying face down in his sweaty, salty pillow, his face starting to sweat but breathing just fine through the tunnels of dust - when he looked up, about to press deeper, and saw:

>sorry I had to go to dinner!

Luskonneg barely registered relief. It wasn't actually surprising, nor did it change anything except the worst. *Low stakes.* He remembered why he rarely DMed. He couldn't do this every single time.

>didn't mean scared like that. I don't think I have much of anything to get into an argument with you about?

>unless you think Lucielle should have ended up with…

>sorry I don't mean this that way either, shouldn't say it.

Luskonneg felt bad now, and who knew how much worse he would feel if he left off here.

>maybe I would rather do video.

>oh! will you be around in a couple hours?

He looked out the window. No clouds to trap the lonely pale of city-light, no glue-strip of gloaming lingering along the horizon - the kind of dark that sucked light endlessly out of the room. He felt tired, then hungry, then shivery, all of which extrapolated out a couple of hours to absolute bedridden agony in which he would be unable to force himself to finish a sentence without crushing the basic pleasure-seeking instinct that had become the sole load-bearing pillar of his life.

>yes

What? He didn't even *not know* how he had done that.

There wasn't a perspective shift like last time.

Well, maybe then, the forces deep inside him (he personified them sometimes as a shadowy but gentle assemblage of rounded heads and clay hands molding him) that knew somehow what he could and couldn't handle knew this would be a safe thing to learn. Like posting, posting under a consistent username, disagreeing with people less popular than him, disagreeing with people more popular than him, doing both of these on the same account, picking out an avatar, replying to replies, following back. Unlike going out to the November Thistle, taking memory-inducing drugs, talking to weird monk journalists. Maybe he'd lose all those crazy things and get one normal thing in return.

As his thoughts over the last four hours - each premised on forgetting all of the others - (to the point that when he typed *yes* he hadn't been aware of it at all) - fell into place, one simple criterion of resolution emerged.

It had been months since he had cleaned his room (as opposed to taking specific *objects*, usually by themselves, to the garbage chute at the back of the hall, a procedure that was permitted on condition of not having anything in particular to do with the room as a *whole*). He wasn't about to now. He wasn't asking anyone to be in it. (And if

he lost the will to order food or found it to do something more drastic and that journalist got an excuse to finish her story without his consent - the scenario he'd spent the most time imagining lately - he didn't want to let her get away with any illusions about what kind of person she was investigating.)

All he needed to do was clean enough to look more or less like Jhossan from *The Clover Association* - his working upper bound of Llau's lower bound of a recognizable human.

(Wait, Llau had to have watched some better shows with shut-in characters, right? There was *Shut-In Magical Girl Reirei*, but he had complained about that one...)

He stood up, turned 360 degrees, and did the preliminary exercise he'd learned for when his mom occasionally made him clean years ago.

The one she'd -

No, it didn't matter now.

He was standing up into a space centred on him, where his head held up the sky, and he could see the logical extent of every direction.

He divided this space into nine squares.

Quadrants.

Except that was four.

Each square *had* quadrants - it divided into four. He had thought about this, right, it had just been so long.

Thirty-six.

The primes of two and three intersecting, the same combination in two directions, a multidimensional symmetry.

Only one-tenth a longer count than half a minute, or half an hour.

Half an hour theoretical baseline for the time it took to pick up everything that shouldn't be in each quadrant and put it where it belonged or throw it out.

Of course, he rarely hit baseline.

And what belonged in its quadrant, and where it belonged, weren't self-evident.

But there had been rare occasions he'd cleared a 3x3 square, a whole four quadrants, in under a minute, which

allowed him to feign hope he could compensate before giving up halfway through.

This time he mapped out, based on the overview of Jhossan's room overlaid on his own perspective's rhomboid, the quadrants that would be most visible from his webcam, in the grainy dim light of his single aging bedside lamp - (the last overhead bulb had broken half a year ago) - which he could never get it not to degrade into pixel necrosis.

That was already one difference - which he could probably turn to his advantage, at least: he was going to look like a creepypasta.

He would - unless he sunk extra paralysis and effort into finding another position for his laptop, swept the figurines off the top of his drawers maybe or just called from the toilet (*he remembered what the toilet looked like*) - be looming over the camera, which he had nowhere else to sit but his lap, in bed, as always. He had cracked his one flimsy table in two in a hanging attempt; its pieces still lay tipsily to the right (from his current, backward-facing perspective) of his mattress. The paint was chipping from their edges, scored from random venting attacks with his kitchen knives, pornographic doodles attempted and

gouged out with their tips.

Yeah, *that* would never show up in Jhosann's room, would it...

If he kept the camera angled up, and pointed the light up at his face from below, maybe Llau wouldn't have to see any of this. Just the posters, which whatever the state of the rest of this place, were still his pride and joy, still the most home he'd ever created.

A found family of young girls and boys who looked only at him and all the time.

Afraid of the judgment of even fictional eyes.

No, there still had to be something to do to settle his stomach. He might want to change position - he usually did, sitting any one way felt like a stress position.

(*Change position* - shit, that sounded kind of gay. And rolling around, kicking his legs, scratching his balls, all that stuff he usually did on the mattress - an affectionate dance with his laptop - that would be kinda gay on a call, wouldn't it? Or with a female journalist, couldn't she decide it was sexual harassment?...)

So. First quadrant - immediately where he would be seated.

Half buried under the edge of the pillow, the tissue box probably needed the dozen or so balled up yellow-crusted tissues removed from inside it. And crumbs and hairs and pieces of... gum? When had he ordered that?

Just off the edge of the mattress rolled - five, six, seven, along the top eight, nine - along the other side he wasn't going to look, it was outside the visible area, blacked out by Fog of War - (*no it isn't - stop looking over there! - no it isn't - who cares, this is just wasting time - yeah you just wanna waste time huh. come on, just a little more - fuck you!*) - empty plastic (two, three glass) bottles of varying shapes and sizes.

The drug flasks, of course, included.

Come on, they just wouldn't bother to draw that much of anything on a cheap lazy show like The Clover Association!

Scissor-slit plastic wrapping from the cardboard delivery package six of the bottles had come in.

Another cardboard box in which the entirety of the col-

lected works of one of his favourite doujin artists had arrived - hadn't he stuffed some of those under the mattress? - yes, there they were, corners dog-eared out from under the edge - a cumstain on a corner so hard and thick he was actually kind of proud of it -

Still, he probably had to hide that too.

(What would it look like, a grey ring of flickering static?)

On that note, three cum-socks, a used onahole and a hyena dildo - he flicked them all effortlessly into the half-open bottom drawer.

A *lot* of crumbs, fingernails, hairs, that same brown grit he'd been playing with and then erased from his awareness... Jhossan could have those implicitly, they just wouldn't show up in the frame either, but as much as the webcam was cruder and less precise than the state of the art line art programs at Studio Blackbox, it didn't know to colour within the lines.

He had a brush and a cute little plastic dustpan (sized for a child's hand) based on Seztzna's from *Interdimensional Maid Agency* somewhere. He couldn't see it anywhere except in Seztzna's left hand, crossed with the brush in her

right, on her poster, beaming.

No - there it was in the garbage pail - one corner was dipped in a sticky blob of... honey? jelly? - already catching a skin of black dust.

He sucked in a breath that shook his ribcage like a sob although his eyes and heart were dry.

He pulled two doujins out from under the bed - at least there were two he decidedly hadn't liked, Smilia got cucked in them by fucking Jenshen no less - and rolled one up a short way from the edge, bending the other into an outward-curving scoop. The combination was actually pretty effective. His hands were stiff and steady. His position the springy, mobile squat of a sculptor.

Still, every time he did a sweep he seemed to just drag half of it back, and the half never dwindled to nothing. He had never in his life solved this problem or even heard it acknowledged by another human being.

Instead of worrying about whether each of them were worth keeping individually, he decided to stack the flyers and receipts and doujins and order sheets into one pile like Jhossan's tankobons. It collapsed demurely in one

corner.

He finished the last of a melon soda and rhubarb CBD left in the bottles. He didn't have any good plastic bags to pile the bottles in since he hadn't been going to regular grocery stores. There was the box, but he'd have to hold it up by the already torn edges... There had to be something in one of the other quadrants, but he wasn't looking at them. (There were cans too, he had never gotten rid of those... he wasn't looking. Not even for a plastic bag, because he'd start looking.)

He ended up just taking them, wrapped up in a helplessly torn (from trying to cut himself) and stained (from a nosebleed) shirt. He walked down the hall to the garbage chute with his feet bare. People had seen him once or twice. It was, he was pretty sure, one of the good things he had gotten used to.

He hummed, as he always did, the hell-shovel's ditty from *Hell Harrowing* as he pulled the chute mouth far enough out to fall open. The chute's bubble-pocked black paint reminded him of the scrapes and stains on the hell-shovel that its voice and the animation of its face subtly, brilliantly equated to stubble as it burbled its baritone feasting-song.

But something about the tone of the shovel's song, the pungency of its belch, was more mocking this time. He wasn't just thinking of the shovel's singalong appearances, but episode 15, "The Augean Storage Bank".

He wasn't taking on an Augean task. He wasn't even taking out any more than he usually did, he reminded himself. And he wasn't going to take any more after he cleaned the four squares of his ideal perspective.

On his return, Luskonneg returned to his camera-angle station.

In the two squares he bare floor almost looked worse than it had before. The colour of the wood, richly warped and knotted, might appeal to Llau's classical C'harnian sensibilities even though it looked all the more like mud with the dust popping on it with long shadows in the smothering warm light. In the two quadrants he'd cleaned, there were so many bits and pieces he'd missed - beads, tape, more gum, more Kleenex, safety pins, a bottle cap pierced too many times by safety pins to close a vessel - and faded, translucent bug corpses. He hadn't seen many since he'd set up the wards, but these had been here a lot longer than that.

He supposed he could allow himself to be pleasantly surprised there weren't more of them.

Then there were still two left... a roll pillow based on the "dick sushi burrito" /b/ meme, sticky with more substances than he could remember. A spiderweb sewed it to a stuffed puppygirl Slina with a mix of gin and cum swirling in the plastic bottle attached to her harness. A spilled bag of rose gummies. Bottles of rum and black rice liquor rolling open (he mixed them at will with his other non-alcoholic drinks). A few cans, but beer and iced coffee, still not the energy ones. A couple strategy guides for RPGs he hadn't played (he'd have to shove them at the bottom of the paper stack...) Paper towels crumpled around dried pink. Right - a few days after emerging from his drug-induced blackout, he'd had shivers verging on a seizure and vomited...

There had to be live bugs in here still. These stupid traditional floorboards were so deep-grooved there could be a whole reality hidden down them where wards didn't reach. If he disturbed enough he would find them.

Luskonneg fell to his lap and regrouped. Maybe there was some other order that would make this feel less daunting - classes of object, rearranging to a pre-established vision...

He collapsed, again, onto his side. This was the kind of thinking he couldn't do while looking at anything. He had to close his eyes and try to summon the images, alone, from the grey rains cape of cool under-blanket air crawling over his skin.

But this time, he fell asleep.

Had the drugs fucked up his whole ability to stay awake in his inner non-world? Collapsed it on itself, like a black hole?

That would be bad, he would get worse if there was a way to get worse, he would only be able to skim his thoughts the way he could barely skim the surface of this room...

Or had it just been what he wanted. It would be simple if it was that - he still, he thought, seemed to know what was best for himself, and he had been feeling on the brink of getting away from himself in some direction.

If he still knew what was best for himself, why was he trying to talk to a stranger from the internet for advice at all?

Because he didn't know how to listen to himself in this whole new language yet, he decided.

And, as he noticed his own thought in an empty head (his head and his desktop both cleaned themselves, the only things he could trust to), *it would be nice to say things like that out loud to someone as I think them, then explain them.*

Not in an article, who would possibly care? But maybe in the vanishing window of a video call, deleted as soon as it ended except in a cache whose location he could forget...

A clank through the hall-facing wall. Was the hell-shovel laughing, or coughing on its cigar?

In thirty seconds, it would be the time he had offered.

He would start the call exactly on time - that would look responsible.

He sat down and positioned himself carefully. Screen tilted up, looking down, as planned.

When he turned the camera on, his eyes were half cut off at the top of the window. His height was making the position nearly-impossible without pushing his laptop far forward, past the edge of his lap where it was controllable, or bending uncomfortably close forward.

But the light, at least, was better than he had expected.

Because he was still facing the opposite direction.

Llau came online before he could correct either of these defects.

"A half-head!" he burst out laughing. (A West C'harn highland folkloric entity that Luskonneg couldn't place in any good media but a number of mediocre ones.)

Llau de Xiau was sitting in a more expensive gaming chair than he had ever posted a hint of online. But its regal lines were broken by post-it notes Luskonneg couldn't read, despite the huge rounded letters on them; his lighting and webcam, although stably centred on his face, didn't seem much better than Luskonneg's. Kitschy pseudo-dynastic wildlife paintings and birthday cards in wooden frames alternated with dogshit mall-kiosk-tier posters of mons shows (favourites and ones he'd barely mentioned alike) and, also surprisingly never mentioned online, a giant wall scroll with a cutaway blueprint of a mech from Najda's underrated debut, *Letter Archons Extraea*.

Luskonneg fell to his side, out of the screen entirely.

"A name-capturable half-head!"

(Luskonneg had no idea what game mechanic that was referencing.)

Moans, grinding throat noises began to rise from out of frame.

“Oh man, you’re not even okay with those, are you? Sorry, sorry, I’m - you would be okay on Feed! I thought!”

That was maybe true. Luskonneg pushed himself up on his hands and pulled himself, like a shonen hero recovering impossibly from an enemy’s death blow, to the side and back, holding himself on his palms and knees face into the centre of the window, albeit coming at the camera strangely, and squinting into the light that was turned straight into his face, illuminating the lines away from the corners of his eyes and nose and mouth.

(There was a bleating quality to the sound of Llau’s voice, Luskonneg had no idea how his own would sound.)

“You realize none of those things are like, making fun to me, right?” Llau's voice was soft and a little scratchy now. He was looking up at the ceiling, chewing his upper lip, and tapping his fingers next to his ears. “Like, it’s funny, but I’d think it was cool if you actually were a half-head.

Or that you have that unibrow - Northern Elmut Confederation? - where your half-head would be..."

This little- ! Luskonneg hadn't thought about the unibrow in *years* -

"They gave a princess that in Princess Museum 5 but I wish it was used in more character designs..." His eyes fluttered back into the frame. "OK, I recognize 5, 6, 7 of those posters, although the light may be making it harder - do you have *candles* in there? Lighting an ita-room with candles would be so cool - dangerous, if you don't have good wards, but I see a bunch of wards on the walls..."

Luskonneg forced a smile and decided to play along. "Yeah! It's an... aesthetic I've been... playing with since I... read this weird... site about... Elphantom..."

"Oh sweet! Can you turn your computer around! I wanna get a screenshot, maybe even post it somewhere..."

His smile cracked. "I'd rather not."

"Elphantom though... like the 3290 Elphantom? I really love how fluidly those designs move, the mix of rounded and sharp edges, but the mysteries and gore made my head

hurt too much to really want to watch more than the sakuga compilations... But you're really smart so I bet you can keep up with them!"

I can't keep up with the mysteries, I spin them off in dozens of directions in my own head and then lose track of what happened in my head and what happened in the show. Online he would have replied with that without difficulty; now he seemed to be losing track of the sentence by the time the words were out, too slow to hold a thought but too fast to think. His voice was low, evenly raspy, like a finely raked gravel yard, not unpleasant, at least in his own ears - but he had the sense that it would run off in some other direction if he spoke too fast. "Actually I meant... the books..."

"Oh right, you read too, I remember you posting about the Hell Harrowing light novels years ago!"

A thirtieth-anniversary spinoff written by an experimental novelist. He had read them more for the rumoured scene where Smilia serves her vaginal discharge at a convoluted tea party death game than out of an interest in literature, but found they evoked more of what was unique about the atmosphere of Najda's vision than almost anything the fandom or the owners had produced since. Where were they, anyway? Presumably in one of the fog of war'd

squares of his room - but he had no plans to go back to those. He might even keep pretending they didn't exist after the call was over.

But he suddenly remembered the shape of her legs in the cream succu-spats so cutely blocky in the layered pencil semi-chibi, the eye with its two square oval sparkles peeking out from under the halo-MRI -

A purity none of his pleasures had had since he'd stopped being able to look at things outside the fog of words -

The whole picture was coming back. He had put it in the basket. He had been upset about the hair and dust falling on her face, and had wiped it off with his finger, and then put her back to finish the last chapter when he wasn't ashamed.

What blue basket? Why had he had a blue basket?

His mom had brought him a bunch of stuff from some new healthy grocery store, and wanted him to keep the basket she'd brought it in because it came with some discount, and also so he'd just remember the name. The store was all the way on the other side of town.

Her smile had been so weightless, it was obvious how much better she was doing without him.

The name was already scratched off the basket by the time he left the book there.

The basket had been sitting at the bottom left corner of his bed -

It had been covered by the inflatable Nimbus Mallow he hadn't been able to inflate, it had been the base for his cutting board when he tried to make that fancy meal package, then he'd left the remains of the meal package all over it -

He tried to pull himself away from the screen, in the opposite direction, crawling like he was possessed.

His leg pulled up towards and kicked the screen as he scrabbled with vague boxes in the background, a radioactive horizon against which the posters portrayed a sepia diagram of heaven.

He knocked over several of a row of plastic bowls near the foot of his bed against which he'd been unconsciously backed. One rolled toward the camera.

He wasn't 'cleaning', so it didn't count. He didn't care where any of the things he pulled off the gently indented flatness he recognized as the top of the basket went. None of them would be in frame anyway. He pulled it out of the dark like something from nothing, and the dark rolled off it like water. Even the dust flickered gently in silhouette like small signal fires, as the light scored a clean reflection off it.

He whipped it around and held it out in front of the camera. (Too late, he noticed his gritty and chipped fingernails.) "This one!"

And pressed his cheek delightedly against the back -

Before noticing the bowl now rolling between his knees, and flipping it upside down to rest.

"Yeah I was wondering what was in that cereal. It looked like some kind of crème or hard mousse. I know they're crazy good at that in the Eastern High Provinces, I'm so jealous you get to have that all the time..."

The closest Luskonneg had come to sampling any such regional delicacies (who still said High *Provinces*?) was the ill-fated croissant.

The hard, pink crust in which his half-finished bowl of cereal had been submerged - after coming up from the drugs, several times he'd lost the meager contents of his stomach, tried to lose contents his stomach didn't have -

He couldn't even try to come up with a lie.

He tried to laugh at the whole thing. He had long known that a villain's over the top laugh was a real kind of thing, even though most people would never hear it. It was a laugh of pain. A laugh that's loud and taut for the same reason as a scream.

Then he hit close on the stream.

That proved it. He couldn't even let this happen again. He unfollowed @Suburbophile on Feed. His messages asking what had happened still went into @moephrenology's inbox, but as message requests, which separate tab he'd have to click over to. Not that he had anything else in messages now.

He sat up in bed and tried to finish the last chapter of the book, one sentence at a time. The sentences didn't seem

angry at him, they welcomed him, but he kept wandering off.

He methodically kicked one bowl after another off the edge of the bed.

When he finally, so half-asleep he suspected he could forget anything he didn't want to see by the morning, clicked over to his message requests, he saw - over a page in a single message block:

I see why you don't want to do video call I think. I asked my mom about it and here's an intro letter you can write the journalist:

Hi, My name is _____

(he still hadn't introduced himself, had he.)

I am still a little dumbfounded by this whole request, but I understand human interest stories can sometimes be random or quirky. So while I would be flattered by the attention, I am very unused to it and would be rather nervous. Would it be all right to conduct some preliminary interviews by text before considering a video call? Would you want to know most about:

- My life story

- My tastes & hobbies

- Why I became NEET

- What I'm doing to get help

- What I need most

- My dreams & aspirations

Uncontrollably, with the relish of a whole new website where his most deranged thoughts had never been heard before, Luskonneg was adding in his head - my rankings of today's professional and doujin animation and game studios - *my favourite threads of the past five years - the closest times I've come to suicide - my waifu - my preferences for a live-in partner -*

"The problem," Shaïgnar rumbled almost inaudibly, only lightly burnished by the echoes of the small chapel, as when he was concealing an emotion he couldn't release for fear of scarring the souls of anyone in earshot, "is not that you can't be memory-wiped. It's that the [Taboo Pre-

server] can't. There are too many spells it would risk interfering with. You knew that when you accepted the changes in protocol - when you *petitioned* for them." Whenever his voice raised on one word at a time - it struck like an iron bell.

Shaïgnar fished in the hexagonal font that stood at the centre of the altar, the opal-coated egg suspended from it golden chain just barely touching the surface of the water. He pulled, from among the donations purified in its waters weekly, a single, tiny, almost-blackened coin with a winged skull embossed in its centre.

"I would have had to imagine it could be used in a way I still don't understand..."

For the past week, Rraihha Braz had been witnessing something that should have been impossible given what she knew of magic.

Whenever Ymañn Ulwenn crossed her mind - whether he was awake or asleep right now, whether he was worried, whether he had tried drawing anything less terrifying, the texture of his hair springing unbidden to her hand or cheek when too much static charge built up in her from paperwork - the paper tag Shaïgnar had given her flut-

tered.

When she tried to prove this was a coincidence by imagining him in as much detail as she could - lying down, shaping the surface of his face like a wireframe, his eyes open, his eyes shut, almost close enough to kiss - it whipped around in all directions and nearly tore itself off her and she had to stop.

It fluttered again - *how do you stop thinking about someone* - again - *without thinking about them*.

And now she knew why. Though she had no idea how - not how they had known where she was, nor that she might even harbour such a vulnerability, nor how they might have exploited it - she had been entrapped by no less than the Seer In The Half Light.

Her feelings were being used as a substrate for the same kind of disruption attack that had been used on the power station.

Shaïgnar took the coin and fitted it into the round, even hollow that was the pupil of the spiral flame in the left eye of the acacia-carved serpent entwining the rose quartz column at the left of the altar. “It could have been used - for

regular blackmail - or simply to identify you as a point of contact. I don't care how secure you think Contour is - the reason you use *our* priests isn't just so we can watch you, although we clearly needed to more than I thought."

"I would have confessed to our priest if I had... believed it first. I confessed to a travelling priest because... I didn't want it in the records forever."

A convex, bulging, bubbling flame appeared in the lens that stood on its wheeled brass scaffold in front of the altar. The candle in the niche beneath the font it was meant to magnify was unlit. "If you had falsified a confession, that would have been worse."

"It didn't feel like falsification either. Like... the feeling isn't real, it can't and doesn't have to be real. But it would have to be confessed even if it wasn't."

"But you couldn't simply tell our priest you were having intrusive thoughts."

Braz scanned the few lit votive candles in their rows on either side of the chapel until she recognized the shape of the flame magically projected in the lens. She twisted its square base in its socket. "No, because they're not *thoughts*.

That would have been falsification."

"You wanted to seal away a contradiction in an envelope and burn it up." He nodded. "If Voidhanger is what I remember, the spell may be Preserved not on your thoughts, but on your rhi. That might give you a framework for understanding the *reality* of what you have been dealing with."

The last of the five panels of the soapstone reredos depicting the Goddess dancing the five stations of living systems (in a tastefully abstract neo-Nordic style, Her silhouettes only accidentally human, as if they had been carved by sea-wind atop some cliff) - her arms bent and crossed towards the ground, Her leg raised behind Her - slid behind the others, revealing the hallway leading to the [Taboo Preserver]'s chambers.

"My... rhi?" Braz stepped forward, paused; Shaïgnar stepped ahead of her, through the breach.

"Yes. Emotions produce predictable rhi movements. Your thoughts, on the other hand... you haven't been able to explain your thoughts about Ymañn this whole time, because you don't have them - and thus, to admit them, you had to stop thinking. Rhi-magic capable of using rhi as a

substrate is rare. But I've seen the Voidhanger Abbot do it. I've attempted to learn it from him, and failed. I don't like what that might say about this Seer In The Half Light."

"The Half Light... right! Do you have any idea what that druid poem means? Have you heard those lines?"

Shaïgnar furrowed his brow. "There are things they would not teach me. Because I was not the right type of person." Braz nodded gravely - feeling the bitterness he felt saying this to her, now, wafting across the air. "The druids don't just believe that magic is too dangerous for humans - they believe even language is incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands. And they hardly lack for anything we have of it. The stories the lay people of Zorrh tell each other all day, their years-long role-plays, excel in variety and beauty any of the slop that Dark Lord guzzles and calls himself an aesthete. Those who know not, know not what they lack. Not even the way our citizens know the blurred outline of the Dark. They do not know what they could possibly lack, as it must be something they could not invent, and there is nothing they could not invent. Nor do I."

Arched niches in the walls of the stone corridor, lit by ice-blue candles, were painted in deep woad calligraphy with poetic warnings in the ancient style, redolent not of mili-

tary confidentiality but ancient curses and long-forgotten magic - *Death comes on swift wings, Abandon all hope ye who enter here*. "Then how would academics in Romarosa have heard it?"

"Don't you think that's your job to find out now?"

"I'm still going to be memory wiped, aren't I?" She looked up through tears that stuck absolutely still in her eyes which wore them without ostentation. "Losing me might destabilize Ymañn a bit, but it'll settle. He was selected to withstand shocks or he wouldn't have passed selection. We don't have to tell him the whole story, the hard parts. Just that I was compromised." She swallowed. "We could even pretend I died." Gulped. "We could really kill me, to be maximally safe."

"You may come back to the sense I saw in you yet." Shaïgnar shook his head. "I suggested this when the special permissions were first proposed. You haven't found out why they were first accepted, then, have you? We have rhi measuring devices throughout the [Taboo Preserver]'s chamber. When your absence extends beyond their expectations - or when had to refuse their affections on grounds of protocol - Ymañn's rhi fluctuates and disrupts the spells to the same extent we're now measuring from your curse.

The others, I suspect, had not heard enough Druid songs to understand the tragic purity of what they were looking at. They saw a small deviation from Order, an imbalance of finite needs to be corrected, not an already-perfect Order that could only be realized in death... I suppose it makes sense that such an anachronistic soul as you would become the vessel for such a story in our time. A story that requires such total control of your thoughts that the remainder of feeling raises itself up in terrible isolation. I'm sorry I couldn't see earlier that your structure would be so cruel."

Braz's throat was dry. At the end of the hall she could see the first of the series of curtains. She was suddenly aware of the presence of his familiars, hidden somewhere on him or around them.

"If you're willing to do that, turn back now, and get it over with. No one will have to know."

She stopped.

Gripped the handle of her sword.

Gritted her teeth.

The tears advanced a millimetre down her cheek.

He could do it without her - do it regardless of what she did. But she didn't want to disappoint him this last time.

But would the person in his story be able to turn around, here?

She wasn't in a story. She couldn't tell if Chaos or some higher Order had led her here, but her Order was the Order of the world, and the Order she chose. Her Order wasn't selfish - and above that - *above*? - her *love* wasn't.

The word she hadn't allowed herself to think since her confession clamped the symmetry into place and erased all doubt in its perfection. She turned, eyes closed, not even thinking of -

Curtains rustling. Serrated echoes of sharp barks that trailed off into throaty moans. She couldn't hear the footfalls.

Shaïgnar's blue-grey wolf, face lined with a mask of lighter fur - his executioner, untransformed from the white cape no longer wrapped around his shoulders - stared down the gigantic white dog, its long face descending towards them

like a comet, a drill of writhing spikes, its paws stretched in front of it to either side of the two humans.

Dog and wolf growled subsonically at each other, and the air, no, the fabric of space, warped and bubbled around and between them.

Braz was looking past the dog, staring in poisoned terror at the fluttering curtains through which it had slipped like a wind, watching them settle, trying to settle what she would do if they parted again without thinking.

The wolf flattened its ears, pressed its shoulders back, bent its tail between its legs, flicking its tongue around its lips and speaking in gentler whimpers and yips as the dog bent its nose close for licks of obeisance, eyes beady and inscrutable.

Braz still didn't know how many familiars Shaïgnar had with him, but no more emerged - provoking the three dogs at once would be suicidal.

"The [Taboo Preserver] has closer and wiser guardians than us, and I defer to their judgment." He turned around, no longer making eye contact with Braz. "You have a lead on the Seer in the Half Light. Pour all your grief, all your

humiliation, all your.... into that. Perhaps you can tie up this thread before it unravels our project - I should say our world. If you go to Voidhanger, they might even be able to teach you to suppress your rhi. But you should harbour no illusions about coming back here even if everything goes well. If this truly was an unforeseeable event, we can't allow any others. I will inform your immediate superiors what they need to know and no more. As of today, consider yourself a ghost."

"Do I - even get to say good-bye?"

"You have sixty seconds to tell me what that would do besides give yourselves another image of each other to return to."

That *was* one of the ordinary functions of a farewell.

On the other hand, closure, not having to think about it any more - but she knew there was already a plan for that. There probably had been before she and the [Taboo Preserver] even met.

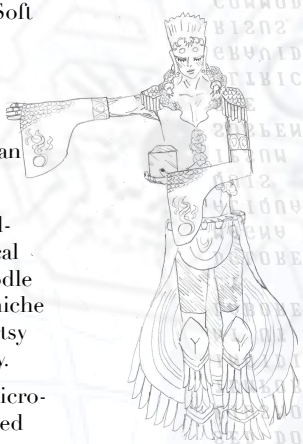
And she knew a farewell wouldn't give her that anyway.

But for thirty seconds she stood and experimented dili-

gently with the beginnings of words. She knew there was an answer, a kind of magic she hadn't learned. She counted the seconds herself. Then Shaïgnar nodded and she turned away, letting the pace of her stride pick up as the cool fingers of light from the chapel door stretched out toward her, and Ramaña Shaïgnar dragged his feet as he advanced, a dog and a wolf at either side, to be the bearer of false news.

Down by the River to Pray

by: Amara Reyes



Name: Rain Flower sel Lock Wave (cal Soft Fang; cal Pearl Wall)

Birthday: January 2nd

Sex: Silver male

Occupation: Courtier, receptor technician

Blood Type: B

Likes: Grudges (holding his own and admiring ones that others carry), alchemical theory, habitat design, every type of noodle ever invented, niche designer fashion, niche designer fruit, beaches, janitor pilots, artsy documentaries, foxes, pistachios, privacy.

Dislikes: Work, study, fiction, politics, micromanagement and disrespect, limits placed on potential, nostalgia, being separated from Lune, Savannah spinelight, liquor, plain water, wild ocean, most herbs, wishful thinking, flowers, and violence.

Seen with: His coterie peers - one of Hightower culture's fundamental social units, somewhere between sorority, siblings, salon, and tiny political party - a few members of the law ship's crew, and in Sever's vicinity whenever possible.

Part of the garrison of the Lunic quarter, a collection of necessary workers, eccentric influence-chasers, and political refugees that make up a minor bulk of Savannah's human population. Rain belongs to all three of these groups simultaneously. Having grown up in the middle circles of Hightower's petty nobility, he's idolized Sever Malice for years but wasn't quite high up enough in the hierarchy to be able to pursue a similar career in architecture, and instead specialized in the vast works of engineering that support and construct habitats. Accustomed in his bones to luxury, but doesn't depend on it, and can build his own in most places. Careful and reckless in equal measure, easily trusting and easily slighted, has issues with commitment and a very unexamined sense of justice.



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.

Last Time

the crew of the umihotaru weighs past failures of human ambition and comes to grasp the scope of that of the tengmu

CW: hell, genocide, altered consciousness, derealization, religious hierarchy, religious conflict, genetic engineering

The way down from the mountains was an arm. It recalled an arm, a cat, a sealscript tablet? No, let me... I think it's best pictured as every delicate part of the human body in a contiguous pale cord of skin. A tower blending from earlobe into ulna into collarbone into rib, moving slow and smooth in the dark. And where the mountains intersected the heavy, heavy red sky there was a sort of frame that the arm clipped into, and clipped out of again at the accompanying frame down in the center of the city where they burn the fires.

The city rises unceremoniously from the void. Blue, very blue stone, perhaps literally lapis. Built in concentric circles out of great roughly-hewn cubes, I had the distinct impression they had been dropped somehow from above. The camera swoops in quickly, soon we are close into the

plateaus and shelters... the souls here. Smog-spider-fire scribbles coagulated into the seams of the edifice. Like, like... like little pipe cleaner cages, a shuddering filamented heart crystallized around its own mantras. I couldn't look too closely without falling into their motive wells. Very simple; very, very concentrated. Ah, spider was the wrong word. Perhaps clusters of caterpillars? Cocoon, cocoon seems like the orthodox metaphor.

2004 Dis Exploration Footage Report: Scry Lead Victoire Ueki - Tremont Divinities Seminar archives

You start at the roof. It's this old crumbling tower like out of a storybook, made of big rough bricks and a thatch roof. Felt like a run-down old barn. Or maybe an old temple built back into a barn, anyway rough grey clean overgrown bricks. You saw, standing on the thatch I mean, the black starless sky and a rainbow crashing down like a waterfall into the ground, so we panned down and it was flowers and flowers in flowers, the rainbow splashing into these flowers. Like a whole meadow. Lilies and eagleflower and thistles and roses that kept twitching, changing colors, becoming...

Okay, let me try it like this. One rose would feel like this: smell of copper, crystal, sand and seagulls, teardrop salt,

velvet, peach and cinnamon, earwax, texture of salmon, rotting fruit. But another would feel like this: graphite dust, old fungusy tree bark, bat leather, raspberry wine, perfect circle, mother of pearl, rock dust in the fading sun, a low distant train rumble. See? And they'd look exactly the same, but it was the difference between like warm red and cool red.

We realize we're at the foot of the tower now, pulled down when we were looking. But then the camera tracks up the rainbow again, and the whole sky, I mean the *whole* sky like all the blackness in it. You realize it's not a sky, it's a ceiling. And it's made of wings, just mats of whirling black wings with no birds, packed and packed in there like, I don't know, like they were becoming water but still flying.

2004 Dis Exploration Footage Report: Tenor Aclla Robin Madison - Tremont Divinities Seminar archives

But in some audits motive purification and votive realignment are both infeasible. The singular method to *remove* an undesired spirit is complete annihilation of all matter conjugated with it.

This is a condition unique to our age. One cannot annihilate a river - all impulses encoded into it will disperse

with the water, be engraved upon the land as ley where its beds once proceeded. But likewise one can very easily *change* a river, as the surface of Heath is an inescapable chorus of scar tissue upon lush scar tissue. It is only modifiable for the sake of that same scale; when nothing can be destroyed, all tools must be worked with. When a river runs sour it is a matter of *processes*, similar to topsoil replenishment or groundwater laying, a careful gardening back to health. But habitats have no wider song to fall back upon. Each is possessed by their very young, still-forming spirits; of the spine, of the windows. Each of these dwarfs any river. And each are incredibly suggestible at the time of any audit.

Each new habitat either joins the choir predictably, quickly settling into the flow of wheel or canopy or ellspace, well-treaded rows. We must stress that corruption is rare. The process is understood. But the earliest tones of society on a habitat will live with it forever, and it is the primary task of an audit to completely record this snapshot to look back upon decades after establishment. But it is the primary task of a *speaker* is to alter it.

If flourishing has not taken root at the place you are assigned, it must be spoken into existence. Censure and

structure must be made, and the guidance must be effective. You are not dealing with people of your era in roles you understand. You have already stepped into legend and folklore; you speak to ancestors and the beginnings of lines. You are at a station at its establishment. Major spirits will reflect this beginning most completely, as the original hopes and dreams and flaws of their projects deepen and clarify themselves with time. Staff and stake are all immersed in these concerns, but only you are capable of unraveling them. Your primary concern during a habitat audit must be the analysis and management of whichever spirit has become most central. You must attune yourself to that center, hear its voice work through you, and know very well which direction it pulls you in. You must hold the heart in your hands.

Glorification is the complete failure of an audit. To even approach the idea, you must be utterly sure that there is nothing left to do, nothing left to salvage, no worth at all in what you have found here. But know that glorification does not destroy, it prevents. Nothing is lost but a future of misery, a slide towards hell, a long agony of dissolution that the Ecumene was created to stand at the gate of.

The world is strong. But it can happen anywhere.

Haruspicial Standards and Principles, Speaker Role, Revision 46 - Warren Olkha

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Record VI

What occurred prior to our Lieutenant's defection

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"You have to come now." Kuryo's hair was wild and spreading in the air across the threshold, dressed in undergarments and some heavy cloak thrown over them. The brass of the door still echoed where she was struck it. "Your speaker's sick."

I was out of black sleep then. Never quite in it. When I slept now it was like waiting, heavy wild eyes under the texture of eyelid, always open, always on the brink of slipping into the lucid faculty of wonderland, how in some liuetenants meditation could replace the faculty of sleep. So this was on me mind, one of her usual headaches, I assumed. Like my own, all her lavender work was awful on a few of her centers and sometimes the suppressants failed to catch. "What? It's early. What happened, what are you

doing here?" I asked blearily as I extracted myself from my hammock.

"Now, Sainshand," she tried to bark authoritatively, but it came out weak. She wouldn't meet my eyes. My entire body felt like it was turning red, she would answer no further questions, I flew to the women's dorm and Anahit was weakly twitching in her tangle of a hammock, room empty, limbs bent wrong.

I screamed out, rushing to cut her free, "Where is Kaitei? Why is it empty here? Why has no one come? What is happening to the ship?"

Anahit whispered before me, voice small and wavering in the air. "T-the locking staff... the barring staff..."

Kuryo was girlishly panicked, her long nails nervously digging into her hands. "I came to you! You know her, I -"

And then I just *screamed*. "Our engineer! Our engineer, clearly this is a medical emergency, why, *why* would you not fetch him? Go! Go now!" And she did, scattered and shamed and fragile in an honest way. Good.

The door hung open and I was pulling her out of the ham-

mock. Nothing broken, all tender, hips dislocated but that was a simple fix. I pushed her to the wall of the mockingly empty room, next to the doorway, and spread her arms. Opening her chest up for air, God, her eyes were open and flickering. Feverish. Cheeks pale. A low whisper, "Anahit," I cried, "can you hear me, can you? Wake, wake! She's... KAITEI!" and he was there somewhere beside me with a light in her eyes and the blue-red compact applied to her chest. That was immediate results - as soon as the pad was on her she let out one long gasping breath as if she had been underwater, coughing.

"I wasn't here." Her voice was strong and hoarse. "Why? Why was I...?"

I grabbed her wrist. "Speak, speak, easy. Easy. Say more, say more?"

She was looking at nothing, head straining to search the corners of the room. "It was barred, gate of gates," she shuddered, "aching a half down the... ha... flurry of blue bark. Nothing came through after all, there was nothing, it was *closed*, Emelry. Sandpaper furious to chest. A golden cut on the *outline*," and with that last word her voice raised to a scream and fell back again immediately like the calling-cry of an animal.

Clipping. “Listen, Anahit, we’re right here. Right here, solid steel,” I shook her wrist, “and clean clean air. Alright? We’re deep, deep in. Far in, safe.”

I motioned furiously in the air for Kuryo to curtain the window as all the heavens they were piling in now. Anahit strained, skin tight. I passed her wrist to Kaitei.

She flinched and tried to pull away, twisting on the verge of tears, “No. No, it’s my fingertips... they’re ripping...”

“She’s alright,” Kaitei said, two fingers to her forehead and listening intently. He shook his head, entirely in the thrall of his role. “Clipping. She’s alright, she’s coming out of it.”

That’s it. They’d been doing what we had. I was calm, I knew I was calm, I swung slow to Kuryo; she looked back at me blankly and unsurprised, “You have to understand. We’ve been discussing -”

“You’ve targeted her,” I simmered, doing all I could to hold myself still in the air without my shivering fury drifting me away. “You’ve picked out the most tender of us and sought something in her. And now you’ve stolen it? Have you stolen it from her, or have you stolen it from the homelands

you despise? What art is this?"

"Stolen? Everything lives in everyone, you're not listening. That's the one thing you're right about and you're not going to listen." Her hands were working, worrying the edge of the cloak she still wore. "She was finding it! Can you understand? You really just... can't get this? Is it something you're literally unable to understand? You are moving. We are moving. These things must be done, must be understood, if we -"

"We. No." By now my outburst had brought the rest of the ship to the threshold, Didion wild-eyed and helpless, Bettany and Henarl in a tense fighter's impassivity. Harka fluttered behind them all. So I spoke for the benefit of them all. "No hospitality law after this. I do not know where you've dragged her, what you've taken her through, what possible... no. You are dangerous. This is living danger." I was done speaking with her, I kicked off the brass to the doors so abruptly that the group startled. "I want her off the ship, prefect. Now. We never should have brought her here. Anahit was right, before this. We should have been on lockdown. We should never have -"

"You're being a coward," Kuryo shouted, playing the innocent brash crone again. How much of it was play? How

much of it was her toeing our lines of propriety, how much of it was her own frayed instability? I was learning more daily, learning to recognize more in people, but I was forgetting what deception itself was in the face of this black wall of storms. "Who will I go to now, hm?" she continued, "Who shall I tell how you've t-treated me! She was the only one able to listen, look, she's fine! She's fine. See, she's coming out of it. You idiots."

Harka exploded in a shimmering black fervor, squawking from Didion's shoulder so that he lost balance. "Ripper, turner. Sliptongue! They fall about you, they turn! Continuation! You find nothing, she has found nothing!"

"Harka," Bettany spoke, as Didion managed to calm em. Somehow she had ended up by the windows, snuck behind both of us as we argued. "Please. I cannot know what that means, and I need to listen to you. Give yourself time to explain, and us time to listen. Lady Redname, you threaten to break faith with us and you will not leave this ship. You're worried. You don't intend your own spite. You are not of the cult, I know this, they would not blink either. Please, I know you couldn't mean that. Let's to the library and discuss." Voice like cold honey, going through the motions, all she could do was smooth.

I pushed back. Let Kaitei push in to cover me and oh. Oh. I drifted, too straight, before I knew it my hands had snapped to Bettany's lapels. "Well you're not listening to em. Or me. I said that I want her off the ship, I want her off. Whatever they were doing..."

She made no move to touch me, just swung her neck to Kuryo as if I hadn't been in the room. "Library, please," she said. "You and everyone. The lieutenant will stay with the speaker, as one's opinion is clear and the other's still unreliable. Let's."

She knocked my hands away gently, bone tapping bone, and swept the rest of them all out of the room so casually that the argument was struck out of me. Kuryo too had looked like she would fight for a moment, but the fervor had passed in favor of Bettany's corporate calm. Smooth. I flew to the door and slammed the lock across with a great dull thud.

Anahit had shaken herself awake. While we'd argued, she had unwrapped the compact from her chest and was gingerly plucking its tendrils from around her arms. She looked up at me expectantly, lost. But she smiled.

I was at her side, helping her unravel. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry

for the commotion... are you well now? Truly?"

"The headache is back," she winced, "but really it's only gone when I'm working here, and that means the intensity is down... I've been resting a lot, she's been helping me rest."

"Anahit... helping? Don't say that. I feel I put you here, pushed her on you, but this is not helping! Surely you cannot see it so?"

"You needed to, I needed to see her. I think she's one of the pivot points." I moved to touch her shoulder but she stiffened, "No, I'm alright. I'm still coming out of it, but I can see clearly. Let's... still" She was pushing herself into confidence. Breathing fast, but she was supporting herself. She wove her fingers between the gaps of the hammock, pushing herself into a proper perch at last.

"Obviously she's important. But was she guiding you? What did she even say this was? I know, I've seen this, I've done it, but during training you are at the most suggestible you will ever be. Are you able to counter? What are you thinking?"

She only held her smile. "It's been so hard with her, you

know. Haha. She is just... I've never met someone like her. She is at odds with everything. She's perpendicular, Emelry, she is just so haggard. It's like she was born in a different world, of a different kind..."

It was like she was slipping away, shifting into that different kind. The tenderness of her face now I had never seen before, that subdued haze about her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You were right, we jumped in too fast... I'm so desperate, aren't I?"

"No. It's good, we've made the bed," she shrugged. "I was so scared at the beginning. I was reading the Shine Sorghum audit the whole way here, I, I, the parts of the sealed file I have. It was weighing so strong in me. The one with the..."

And the parts I had seen of it had been terrible enough - the early stages of an arrow cult. I'd lost sleep over the Sweet Sorghum interview when we were first exposed to them in the liuetenant's course, God forbid what the speakers' segments were."With the factory. We needn't get into it. We've seen enough, dear, we've seen enough here to know it is not *that*."

"Yes, I know." She looked towards the still-shuttered

windows curtly. “There’s less of the fear now that we’re talking. Nothing’s coming in the night. All my Lords, but it is all so weak... And you prepare for the weakness, no? The weakness is inherent, the foundation of the problem at all. But it is usually the weakness of blindness, of being blind to what flourishment is, its workings. But here the awareness is there, but misapplied, how they scrabble towards the ideal but with no structure, no *lines*. So I must to see the lines in it.” Her sharp eyes, so strong in her touch face. “I need to see the lines. It's easy, now. there’s just the work left.”

“But through her... through her, Anahit... what lines are with her? Hers are outer voices. Wrong voices, she has reached in, and...”

“As we will. As all will be.” The room was quiet. In some other part of the ship, some support cycle turned on and hummed through the hull. “Kaitei left me this,” she said, holding up the compact he’d left her with and breaking off the tip of one of the tendrils to chew.

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“So she will be staying,” was the first thing Bettany said to me when I’d joined them. Harka still clung to Didion’s
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shoulder in a show of mutual protectiveness from them both, but relaxed enough that I knew the bulk of any argument had passed. Both of them were those who felt most at home in the library. “No other options, you’ll agree? This will need study, documentation, and all crews reach this point with time and trust. Here we are with little of either and far more than a crew. Do you understand, lieutenant?”

I did. “This is to be accepted then, this level of risk? I feel it’s a miracle she was able to come out so quickly and so intact. We only see this kind of clipping is very early or very radical stages of learning, and we do not have the facilities here to cope with the severe cases. I don’t know how we are to study it. Do we have any format but grasping in the dark, or trusting her methods?” I nodded at Kuryo.

She was neither meeting my eyes nor anyone’s. She was curled in midair, lazily spinning in fetal position so that she was gazing askance out the windows, alone. So wrapped in her cloak that she seemed tengmunnin, with folded wings. “I want a record. Are you peacekeepers or recordkeepers?”

“There isn’t a difference,” I answered.

“Yes. Exactly. So I want a record, a human record. I want

it written that this was done. The speaker told me that this was the way, that it's something that has to be felt. So I want it to be felt now. To prove it. She directs herself."

"Unacceptable. Proof of what? Lavendry is secret but well-recorded, it has been explored and explained for centuries. It is a narrow path and a pure one, one which those centuries have gone into purifying. What do you have that we do not? This is your flaw, Kuryo, heresy of solipsism, that your perspective matters and must be preserved because no other soul could reach the same ground. So you make yourself ready to stand in opposition to the world because you do *not* understand it and if you are going to tell us it must be you, I call you a liar."

"Emelry. I know you're upset," Bettany said softly. I hadn't realized how loud my voice had become. "There's nothing wrong with claiming expertise on something new. You must admit to strange waters here."

Kuryo continued looking into the distance, eyes wide, taking a deep settling breath without acknowledging me. "This isn't working, you know this isn't working, your whole project is hopeless in the form it was originally conceived, so you're punishing the people you've demanded servitude from. Fine. Fine," she spat, "have it all out in

the open. You know what I want. Anyone I'm interested in in this place is about to be crushed. An entire language of being is at threat from the same tired standards you're clinging to, internal divisions, general incompetence, everything! Everything. You've made it clear you've already picked a side, and pretty fucking predictably. Are you able to promise me that you'll be able to grind the gears to a halt? That this is where it finally stops? No, you'll never promise me that in a way I'll believe, kaka. So I told you, I told you from the beginning that I'd work with you, and listen."

"Lot-caster." Harka spread eir wings and held them. "Taker and puller, why is it the thrill that changes your eyes' shade? Why? Yearning black sky. I don't see it, why can I cannot? Likin says solid of the blindness that swallows. It eats. Teeth, spear, never claw. I mine remember. Fluttering in the dark, and no claw in the people of the claw."

"Ha!" Kuryo almost screeched in an echoing call of a laugh. "And you say I'm the one close to the cult, you talking about claw?"

"Dancer," e said simply.

"How can you talk like this? Oh, like everything would be

established already, in full flower. When you've struggled the same for decades in fragile hope of joining your idols? You could have built a whole world, you know. At least Quarry still wants that. But all you want is to drown in the same tired storm, I know where your path goes. It goes down, lackey, it goes down hard, the white death of fire."

I shot towards her, Kaitei only managing to hold my shoulder before I was too far. "You speak so of the sun? You speak so of light without fire under your face? Another world! You refuse to live in the world, you don't want it!"

"Let's hold it? Let's hold it. We don't need to start saying stuff like that yet," Henarl said, clambering between us as precaution. I kept my eyes on her, the room was tense, what were they worried of? How? How was she yet straining, yet against the heart of all things? She had been shown the word here, read it, spoken it, none of her connection to Anahit had told her. Sickly, sickly, and we were compromising.

"Emelry," Bettany said as if she knew my thoughts. "Let's hold it. We've no need of delving straight into debate. For the moment - we can say that we are all aligned towards preservation, no? All who have boarded this ship are already in tenuous position with all authority. This necessity

outweighs our other concerns, any of them. If we meet to survive and succeed, if any of us have hopes they need realized - it has to be here. We can overlook some unorthodoxy. There is no one from rim to rim of the world in the position we are; none have the scale arm to make choices here but us." She folded her hands, satisfied the matter was closed.

"I just don't think it matters," I continued before they had a reason to awe at her. "This goes to the See, eventually. Sooner, later, there will be a leviathan of a hearing. The one way will arrive, the process will succeed, all things will be said. She knows this, and knows it will expose her. How can we trust? How can we share a path when she of all does not believe in its completion? 'White fire', please, we are discussing core principles!"

Kuryo thrust out an arm and stilled herself by a crossing-beam, skull bouncing on her neck. "We can make ourselves indispensable," she said. "Cult tactics that work. They're all done, see, the work is over and their eyes are all empty now. I talk back to you because I know I can get away with it. I'm here and not there for a reason, you idiot girl, they have nothing to lose and no reason to want anything. One outrageous, irrevocable project, and then

they're untouchable, that was always the goal. So we can do the same. Peel back, crack it open, synthesize a new pure unlimited lavender, raise a flag of mind here that can't be censured away. And then we're all safe, and no need to snip."

As if she was planning to find a catalyst. As if she was trying to burn it all down, supposing that she knew better, that she could do it alone. Setting up a refuge tent in wilderness void and holding court there like a capital. As if she could do what Kali did without eir key to the hearts of people, without the flame of flourish she found so rotten! Bettany was looking at me gravely, that same low thunder in her eyes that she barked quiet at me with before. So I let my shoulders relax. "It is a way out. It is. I still...why was she so hurt?"

Kuryo scoffed. "Was she? Was she scared, after it? It can be rocky, yeah, but it's all stuff I've done before. The main reason it'll be difficult is because you are so exclusive with the knowledge, you treat it like a weapon to be responsibly reserved and never talked about. I meant it about exchanging notes, writing them for the first time. Look, can't you see it? If birds can get there, birds, it's not limited by genetics, is it?"

I lost my balance, I *lost my balance* as if I was still down there. I fumbled for something to support me but sold it as a calm drift backwards to rest at the wall. "Ah."

"Door's open. It's been open. Now, lieutenant, the era is turning. Don't you want a precedent, before the meltdown psychic awakening of humanity or whatever? Wouldn't it be a little useful to have an example of an entire society that has lived drenched in just that kind of long dreaming art for its entire existence? Kali and the city folk are right to rush, but not to exclusion. You understand."

Something was wrong. Something was still wrong. I rubbed my eyes; they were aching from behind, from within, like when you need to rest your eyes and so close them only to discover that there is no relief, for even closed you are always looking at something, view ever fixed and focused at some point. What was I missing?

"Very well. I won't fight this. But neither I nor Bettany will let you forget the ship you are on, and the project that is ours. You are not of the crew, and neither yet of Ilion, and your words are weaker for it. But I did once promise you we would listen."

"And we are," Bettany said. "We need perspective. We need

the ability to have a direction. I need both of you, both sights you have, if we are to push through past the pitted ways. We are, then, of accord."

Harka still had eir wings extended, but now snapped them shut in a gesture that Kuryo almost flinched at. "My king's dominion. Claim. Bark orders from here and there, but know Kali guides the skyland. Here yet a thread of faith. Here yet a law, a city. So much new. Claim then always us of belonging, of shared faith, of high faith, of the old word never condemned. So all can dance, yes. But dance is for fat times and health is for ever."

"Well said," Kuryo smiled with a mock bow. "You're right. You are the line unbroken."

Something was wrong.

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Didion's office. Forest of papers in twine bundles, a whole wall of data drives sleeping in the wall array. Neater than mine was, and far more cluttered. He was fidgeting with them, going through the motions of minor reorganization as he did when nervous. He was having trouble meeting either of our eyes.
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"Is this why you all hate her so much?"

"Disapproval," Harka trilled. "Reckless. How can I blame recklessness, well. In her own way she works. But it is against my king."

"Against how? I just... don't understand the struggle. I don't understand any of this, the dreams, the lavender. Scribes don't even *get* anything, only we must hold sober."

"We are early. Three worlds, four worlds on the plain, too young to bare teeth. Nymph, call it, echoes in the still of flourish. Good or bad, way way. Quiet Kali wants, for voices to parse, letter and key both. But Kuryo says the world is inside you, and the word incidental. To chase the blind vision, and see nothing. She wants to see nothing!"

Didion stared at Harka's claws readjusting on eir perch. "I still don't get it... there were just so many people there, at the hunt, it seemed... constructive."

"Growing together. Needs saying. We can all fly as far as we can but it needs to be a road. I'm a follower. Some roads I can't live on, she a road anti-vision. It leads away from you. Away from others and away from the abilities. Basic."

“Irreconcilable,” Didion nodded.

Harka struggled for eir words a moment, shuffling back and forth on the perch, Didion still following the talons with dull eyes. E began with a sharp dip of the beak. “Kuryo wants to fly. She wants to free and be free from the full soul. When jays fly together they are the same. When apes speak it is with the eternal single nymph words, take give help bite go. Fin foot feather and interstice; there is an echo inherent to all life but of people. People have no echo, for we are echoes of God, and gain it in the wave flourish. You see? The relationship is reversed. We become a shadow, a limited cell. Animals cannot die, and people ever do, their candles die and flare, they rejoin. There a mutuality of direction. To be struck from that, to relinquish the road... she wants to find something new. But I cannot believe it. It is the same. They think, our unemployed, that! That they will join a shining river of their own.. Like yours, the low law, but T that they will leap and never die and see more. It is still thought sung too far into song, only feeling, the whisper spirit that blows through any wall. But not mine. No thought without knowing. It is less than a life, it is less than a short life of mine. Would you be blind? Could you walk backwards? I could not even bear a week of work lost. It is hard.” Harka cocked eir head

up at me, nodding impatiently.

That was beyond what I had assumed. I had thought of those of the third as simply unaffiliated, pure and progressing before finding the walls of their hearts. "What, Kuryo and those of the third would reject the project of the species entirely? Return to the motions of animal flocks?"

E fluttered noncommittal. "Yes, but more. Back, no, true side, not a return but a reformation. To have of all worlds, votive bodies and motive wave."

"A shared consciousness?" Didion asked. "This sounds similar to the higher planes. Soul clusters interact with each other very fluidly in the holy world, how flame mingles and splits... our speaker's numbers have been so strange, fluctuating by orders of magnitude... is this why the scries are recognizing souls incorrectly?"

"How? No. It is the opposite, opposite of a society. Nothing shared. I say there is nothing. Pure force dislocated dream. It does not touch the world, it touches not between selves. But it is as incomplete as we. Don't know where it goes. I just think it's wash, not grandeur. Quarry seeks the power we do. They have the same means and goal, but want

to go alone. My king will go with you. E has chased for lifetime. I understand these two paths. Human paths. Three that can communicate. But the rest I don't know, don't want communication, just the eternal words. Empty sky. Whisper, wind, will." E clacked eir beak reassuringly and tentative. "I can't feel it. But in me it would feel oblivion."

"I don't pretend to understand entirely, either," I said. "But you and Kuryo both say theirs is a new way of life. An eternal nymphood?"

"Developed, grown, but never out of the old language. Many of our nymphs leave from the hutches to the distant third, called. Many of theirs arrive to the Quay sobbing with the weight of words they never knew. Can it remain so free? How can we call in a way they hear? You called mine hate. But hate is always fear. I do not understand it, relinquish, kill the spark? Give up not my caw but my knowing of shape? Shame shudder. If I went to song, would I lose my eyes? Was your speaker plucked the same? Saying, I know their life sense. Never can see the world of no sight."

I hissed to myself, thinking of Kuryo still behind the same hull I was. What had I even been hoping for letting her aboard? Now with a few minutes distance from the morning's panic, her words felt less and less crucial in my mem-

ory.

"You are a gambler," Harka croaked at me. E gazed at me in that listening-face of eirs - beak folden down, both eyes meeting mine, gentle clacks of the beak that somehow hardly interfered with eir voice. "It's good."

"Harka," I ventured. Somehow, that last comment barely touched my memory, I barely let myself feel it then. "The body sense... it was hard. Even our measured testing, it is... is it all tripwire? I... if we continue diving into each other. How far can we drift?"

"It was hard. When seeing a human perspective. The wing," E raised one up, feathers full spread, "collapses. Explodes. You... could fly with tucked wrists, dip, dip. But hands are like angels, three wings rotating around each other but they touch nothing, only feel. They fall through the ground. You live in them. Not cold wings or fast claws."

"Yes... It must be like switching hands and feet?" Didion flexed his own hand open and close, intently examining the palm. "As, wings and feet cause movement; hands and claws manipulate. I assume. Rather than limbs I believe center of mass is a primary propulsion thing..."

Harka looked away sharply, clambered to another perch in a shelf handle on a different section of the wall. “True foreign. Regards. Listen, I’ll say. There is a way, my king says, that holds there is nothing special in words. Nothing special in bricks. Nothing worth looking at besides the poetry of the world. But no one writes that poetry. So it isn’t. But there is a way that follows ley like poetry, speaking to the curve and furrow, finding. Down the ramble of blood and water. I don’t believe in it good.”

Didion nodded along, grave. I wasn’t sure if I was seeing it as clearly. The ship whirred, Didion’s menagerie of trinkets clicked in the walls, and something in Harka seemed unsettled. Eir feathers were ruffled and kept sticking out misaligned no matter how ey repositioned, until finally e folded eir wings neat and pecked at Didion’s main workstation.

It stretched out from wall to wall, his curved model, littered with entry devices attached and well-tended to. Ilion’s fairy logo insignia gently moved its engraving across the screen; Harka hopped over like a flechette through the air, probing at the surface of the display.

“Why this? Why horse, you have horses?”

"There are none on Savannah," Didion noted for my benefit. "The niches are just filled differently, deer and pigs."

"What need of horses, is the thinking. Too noble. And what need yours? Galloping up here in the no ground."

I laughed, "Oh, poetic quality, I suppose? We do love horses. Any settlement with hydroponics wings has a few, so anywhere of a certain size. During establishment the See had all these worries about mechanization, so there was a program of disincentivizing it indoors. So we had horses rather than harvesters."

"And old Ilion," Didion added, miffed at me for not including the more properly poetic heritage of it all, "city of horses, distant vassal-allay to Delphi. Bound by names; the first stations to be established drew from the region."

"Noe had something of a fixation on the history of prejesuit cooperation," I said. "Tongue and tower, They wax of it quite extensively in Admonitions."

"Horses..." Harka mused.

"Yes. Ehe. Little fairies we are, don't you see? The small ones to Lune's proud and tall old law. It's funny," I felt my

smile freeze into place, the one I had been lightly wearing was now creased in, “every time you hear from another species that oh, life in unweight must be like flying! But we have birds, you know, birds and climbing cats. But even so. I don’t know if I, even now, have an idea of what flying is. I know what the action is, but... I think of Heath, and how people born there have this perspective, looking up from the world at passing wings, longing to follow, it’s all they write about. But there’s nothing that exists in that space for me. No similar idea? Birds, at home, certainly not here, always seemed to just... drift and perch, just as I did.” Something tugging at my smile. Soon I was in hitching laughter, the kind only in your chest that does not translate to sound. “Aha! But the twice-funny thing of the wings! Oh, they were put there as metaphor for us, but just turned into a play for the horses! Did you know, did you know, the first time I went to a drum farm... we keep them low, lunic or less weight, good old seed stock. I swear, I have seen video of horses on Heath. A shame! Like those thumping red sanguinelles, hooves all but rooted to the ground. Heath horses look so serious and grave, but our horses! Harka, you must see it one day, how they prance and laugh and jump three fields in one bound! Ah, no, we’re just the accompanying unemployed - the project of Ilion was to turn horses to birds!” And I laughed, helpless,

until the laughter hardened like a fist around my chest and Harka could only watch and muster a polite ka.

E was quiet. Eir claws were tangled in the loops of my hammock, but with a shake of eir wrists e was climbing over to me - claw over claw, pulling closer rather than walking or drifting, and only spoke when e was close. “Do you think of that often?”

“Of which part?”

“Of how states must have be named to hold. You can see something but not have it, you know? Not know it.” E interrupted emself with a click, a hard, clacky, disappointed trill. “No, no better. I say that you see a way and feel it, but feeling how it is done is less in the sight.”

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Back to the Lunic quarter with the world on my mind, another few hours shot. It was a very simple compromise, Razina insisted, standard practice, and it was. Light enough to be comfortable for both of us, just far enough on the train to inconvenience us not so equally. The lights were low, and on the way down Kaitei had caught me up.
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In something of a joke, we met in a lounge. They were different down here. Not the quiet, elegant observatory arcs of the spine-adjacent views made for leisure parties, here we looked out far lower, amidst the cliff walls of the cap. The spine far above and the skyland seemed much more a comforting arch rather than an impossible storm, and likewise the lounge was more residential, a proper commune's gathering place.

The doctor looked up at me from her spread of documents, setting down a sheaf of elevation surveys, "Ah! Liuetenant. You've come along. Here, both of you sit, sit. What... what are you carrying?"

I solemnly with two hands put down the stuffed animal upon the broad, slate table. "I hear you've been talking ecosystem. They have these in the shops, you know, in the executive districts? So doctor, tell what are these?"

She laughed, rough and rumbly and a tiny bit restrained. "Oh, oh, the sanguinelle. A very silly thing. Haha, oh, I the mascots... I'm glad you like them, that someone does. We're very confident. Anyndel, he's always been a bit spectacular, I'm sure you can read that one on his face. I mean, it was fun, I had fun working on it, the horn proteins were a joy," she said, Kaitei nodding along.

"But they're beautiful! Emblematic of all the hot haze of the interior, I know about that now! How they must look from above, that stark red upon green and gold..." Kaitei gave me a cold look, and he was right for it. The prefect would not have tiptoed like that. "But, Fisher Valley... do they live close to there? Could I have been able to see one? Come, you've been plenty in the catalogue. Where do these range?"

She was smiling now. "Yes, yes, they're one of the biggest grazer stocks. I prefer the plain giraffes, but those are more about the tree lines. They're more... oh, where should I start, Yu?"

"What do you think?" Kaitei asked, nodding to her. "Let's jump right into the map. We can start with the broadfields and work out from there, a little biome tour."

Razina nodded, and reached up to one of the ornaments mounted on the back wall. A habitat map the size of a small log, mounted on the usual little rotating stand. Together they plunked it onto the table like a secret spoils.

I'd glanced at the digital maps for an idea of the place, but hadn't noted much aside from the major lakes and mountains. This was less exact than those, more stylized. The

mountain ranges were rendered in relief, raised in ridges along their ranges, the length of it painted a rainbow of suggestive colors. Razina was already spinning it, pointing out a few areas of broad flat dusty yellow - not the bright ginkgo yellow or the mustardy deep gold, but the color of the grass that had been burned into my brain from the blood on it.

Broadfields, they explained to me. Flowering floodplains - the way that the seasonal cycle worked here meant that each "year", certain streams would dry, their beds transformed by knots of flowers, and flow again as the lakes swelled and found new roots for the streams. What you ended up with was broadplains, vast savannah crisscrossed with hummocks of hedges and root masses with rare rivers woven between them. Shadowsteppe - wind blew as a rule from our end of the habitat to the opposite. Where the mountains stood and the clouds rising from Fisher Valleybroke upon them, it created long stretches of cracked brittle rocky land dominated by highly derived succulent cover. Kelp lakes - surely the type Quay stood by. Proper rainforest that Razina bragged about sourcing genuine old growth for, ported in from the first-wave Lunic wilderness of High Haven. But among all those colors there were two lines of red.

"What are these?" I asked. "These two lines. There are only two rather than three. They are... at the third-marks, but Savannah has no windows to divide it..."

"Yeah, the third, we primarily call it the third. Sever had it built into the contract that a proportion of the place would be left as wilderness, which has my full support. An entire cross-section of our ecosystemic work that can always come back to seed. It's a very nonstandard model, you know, just the pure unplanned wild being parceled out instead of actual infrastructure. I suppose that's the charm."

She didn't seem very enthused. I ran my finger over one of the mountain ranges that tumbled across both of the red lines, stretching diagonally. The whole interior was like that - mottled stripes of color intertwining, always progressing spinwise.

"If you follow that range, you'll find the driest split. You always find the biggest herds there, moving between the grass and the bamboo with the water. We like to keep our biome mosaics organized down the major rivers, hence three kind of where the windows would be typically, just vanishingly small compared. Spinwise from Valley the third is rockier, and counter wetter, but you see these

guys everywhere in the actual savannah of Savannah. The floodplains, yellow fields, they even fare decently in birch-forest and lichenland."

"It's a kind of contrast, you see," Kaitei laid out for me, "some kind of color theory if I'm getting this right, doctor?" He looked to her for approval; she warmly nodded. "A bit of synthesis between weed and fruit, mascot and scrabble... hard weedy things and leaping bright ones."

"Grittiness, yes. Thistle, sheafweed, chipmunks and giant capys. Quite proud of it."

Yes, the brush and twisted roots of Fisher Valley. The dirt roads - something she could stay proud of, the stucco and clay beneath the white porcelain, the twist and twist and twist. I continued following those mountains, those plains, that river, and sure enough well away from the red lined, down the same river Fisher Valley fed. And sure enough - there, within hours flying distance of those plains by the mountains, the ones I had seen... I lazily spun the map with two fingers, walking spinwise, after I saw it. That swell in the river, the crook of the arm - Quay.

We left peaceably, Razina patting me on the shoulder as I left. She saw nothing in me. How much terror she had

once held in me, symbol of the land and sickness - but now she gazed right through me, and happily.

Another long train ride back. Another special service called just for us, slowed for our palettes - Kaitei had refrained from knocking us out for these ones, as they became routine, and we had less and less solitude for work. So I polished. I polished and polished. Everything in my head would be in my dossier, every piece, every touch and scent.

An hour in I stalled. Pinched the bridge of my nose; it seemed I was catching Anahit's headaches the more I dabbled in parallel processing. "Kaitei," I asked, "I have to say. I still don't know. Your work is all physical, only spiritual in the places it intersects. But I know you have something. What?"

"Ah, that such?" He closed his book and looked at me kindly. "It's nothing, not worth mentioning.

"What do you think? Of what we discussed."

"I'm happy to share. Mine isn't that much a part of my job. It's just the same one the navigators get."

"The full thing. Then you wouldn't mind showing me...?"

"Not at all, I meant it. The least secret by far, and easiest. Hold my hands, I can demonstrate perfectly." So I did. He faced me, took a breath, closed his eyes.

The wheel, invisible in the world and living only in our eyes, blossomed behind him like a halo. A whirling mass of faint purple lights, each moving at different speeds, this vast collection of dust - one speck winked at us from the edges. The Hildas, and Savannah. It was a complete model of the wheel, velocity and position of each asteroid, each station and settlement and liner that treaded it, flawlessly replicated. It blinked out.

"That's all. Not so faceted, useful for little but calendar. A side effect."

But the car glowed.

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"It's very simple, very cryptic. No insight, just direction. Um, it's... politics..."

She was harried. Office a mess. Her body was tense, unable to wait, all but shivering before the great beautiful
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cage of the clayliner that loomed outside the windows. Its gristly pillar was run down another section of the dock pylons - it was the same kind that was most often parked at the Saniasa hull. The wireframe hold contacts, stabilizer slabs, and the raw compressed cargo in a massive slug of matter. To move people across the wheel one must build specialized homes, cities - neotenes bruise at accelerations others find basic, solars quickly go pallid and weak without a sky full of screaming sun; all have their own special concerns. But for raw things, clay and sand and steel, you had only to apply your strongest torch and fly.

Staff was still saying it was a routine supply run, a standard replenishment back in from the nearest station of the wheel with a few errant staff members riding back from their away duties. But this was not exactly standard delivery of orders. This was a clear encroachment of the soft rule of lockdown that audits carry, and with the janitors factored in it edged into audacity. Stress had found her, compounding from this morning, I supposed.

It was time. I asked gently, “Didion said it’s a full oman’s delivery. Why? Is this true? With so few solars aboard, I don’t understand...”

“He’s not supposed to discuss that with crew,” she con-

ceded sourly. “The keyholder is likely the only true oman in regular contact with Savannah. I would have liked to petition for their records, but now this will edge into oath law with no recourse…”

So she hadn’t told anyone but I. Foolish of her, but flattering. “Well? Will we see it?”

She didn’t respond for a moment, weighing her options on getting out of it. But I did not look away, and finally she huffed and made preparations for viewing. “Once more, this is nothing we had not guessed before. But you shall see.” The screen crackled awake, its points flickering their relief across the surface, finally forming the concentric hexagons of the Delphic logo.

It was still strange seeing omen, despite all diocesan traffic naturally being full of them for ceremonial and regulatory roles. But Ilian omen were very different from the true solar ones, the types one saw in so many retroactive depictions of saints and even the messiahs. As if an avatar of the sun has stepped from the page each time, resplendent with their pitch-rich solar skin literally shining that impossible gray-blue color of starlit skies. That disciplined neutral gaze, sharp and towering as an unconquerable widow, hearty and aloof as a brave bachelor.

"I didn't even want to show you. But they're waiting for it. Anahit won't be brushed off, it's Olkha..."

"It is daunting," I said, relaxing and allowing myself to cross my legs.

"Hello," they began, "Speaking is Ifeollan Caihan, we're keyholder at Savannah. Warren Olkha carries branch to this place; true fruit, long light. Our voice moves as hers." The seal recitation was complete, and they shifted into the true message. "The crew is to ignore all orders originating from wheel ship Spiruline. The crew is to belay any incision actions until direct instructions are received. The audit is not to be marked hostile until direct instructions are received. The crew is to remain living aboard law ship Umihotaru. The crew is to indefinitely shelter Kuryo Redname aboard law ship Umihotaru. The crew is to entirely remove Tacimarsa from their future scrutiny. In one week the crew is to submit a complete summary of all persons with connections to Hightower Habitat Solutions' human resources department. And now we know nothing, our sight is our own. Thank you for your time." The message was resealed.

Ifeollan turned away. We stared at the wall as the recording faded to the Delphic crest again, burning from yellow

to deepest purple at the center.

"So its bad," she ventured after the chill had passed through us both. "I think it's very bad. It's bad, God it's bad, they're throwing the whole thing. See, am I wrong here? Is this not transparent? Do they think us simple?"

"Yes. Of course they do, that's why we're here. I suppose its the only weapon we have, that they are still steering us away as if we may discover something. How could it be a throw, how could it be a throw from Olkha?"

'I don't know," she said carefully, "whether to even bring this to the wider crew. The borders are enough for us to know, no? But we have to follow along for the time being. You can be on Rain primarily, work together to dig the info out... solidify the alliance?"

"He wouldn't go along with a pincer attack. Too proud." I still hadn't looked away from the now empty screen, running through the orders. Tacimarsa's inclusion made no sense, how could this come after her preliminary was already reported, how could they think we could get anything from that woman? "But I can speak with him."

"We need something to offer up. Tell me, is the Sever con-

nection there? Any corporate impropriety? Is it all smokescreen, or will you find anything?"

Find anything? Find anything? A few stolen machines, a resentment that was the least secret thing across the entire body of staff? Months ago, I suppose, the suggestion of illicitness would have shaken me - now, what betrayal could it possibly be? What betrayal could stand as more than a candle in Savannah's false sun? I was hopelessly gone the second Likin had called for me, really. But it was then that I knew I had decided. "You can't be thinking of actually following through on it. We can falsify some things, push it a bit longer -"

"And then what? What are we going to do, how long can we hold out like this? We need - we need to get - agh! I just... how long do we have?"

I cocked my neck. "We're not throwing it. We can't. You were there, Bettany, burning with us. Listen, I've done the interrogations. I've spoken to the two most prominent of the faction, and Beckon more than plenty; I've spent enough time at the receptor to judge well the tenor. If there is any major structure here unadjacent to the cult, with their own motivations, it is them. Any, I think any posturing must be done at their side. It's that or yes, go di-

rectly to the See, and we are not ready for that. We aren't."

She made one of her rumbling defeated sighs, slumping by her elbow against the wall. "I don't think there's anything. I don't think there's anywhere else to go. Henarl's been telling me and telling me that it needs to be done, that at least the broad gestures must be made, and now this oman speaking to us... is there a route? Do we just default? Henarl insists that the longer we wait the worse it will be, the more they will suspect us before others... the doors are closing, Emelry, I think they are."

I pressed her, "Did, did we hear from Tiv and Mat? What is this? Closing us off, nonchalantly positioning new handlers? We have to reach out to them again, I... with them involved we would not be so trapped..."

"Involved in what? Full conspiracy?" Even now she seemed uncomfortable at the suggestion. "No, we have to follow orders here, we have to at least have the appearance. We can trust Rain at least a little, no? Promise him collaborator's immunity, something we can handle if we're locked out of hostility... oh, this is ugly. No, we've given the twins enough to carry. If we falter here... Knowing Olkha there will be reconfirmations, we need real documentation. Throw them some meat to be left on longer, for

more time..."

This was disgusting. Not only a fellow haruspex but a revered one, a beloved teacher - how would Anahit react to this? Such little loyalty left, no honor to cling to. There was nothing here. "We won't win anything by doing what they ask. We need to make this ours, Bettany. How can we?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. Hell!" and somehow I found myself consoling her.

We sat together for some minutes. I assured her I would speak to Rain, formulate an angle of attack, coordinate with Didion. There would be a way around, I eventually told her, a way to hold the course. But there was still nothing.

But there was something in her. She couldn't quite see that we were alone. She knew that all this secrecy was redundant, that both staff and our superiors had a common and perverse goal - but to even suspect, much less question, an oman's integrity was impossible. It was a terrifying position to be in, years of being forged into a flawless tool, a paragon of humanity - but Caihan was Aetheotl's last name, and there were precious few solars at Savannah. There was now, with a word, the true possibility of the fist

closing. I had given a grudge to the one person at Savannah capable of making the sun disappear.

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"Hello, Rain."

"You said that very sadly." He hooked the tops of his feet into the perch and settled neatly. "You look sad. Holding court right outside my workplace now, la? You gotta feel quite safe out in the open."

I laughed, sadly indeed, though he read it as an awkward sigh. "No, no. It's fine. Better here than slinking around. I'm asking you some perfectly routine questions about how the receptor's run. Just an informal follow-up to my productive talks with Beckon Bell."

At that name he was now listening to me less. "Beckon, I see. Well, have at it." He took a long sip of the colorful drink packet he'd brought, looking down his distant nose at me.

"No, no, no play from me," I said, reestablishing, "I ask... is it your impression that this is a silver job? Perhaps its my impression now, at least my role. It's a lot of the same
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social dance, isn't it? I've been thinking of that often."

This hadn't satisfied him. "Well... something like that. Especially in longer-term crews who have to come together and worry over careers together, right? I always felt like the groups they put you in work kind of like coteries."

I hung my head, veil shielding my eyes, and spoke to my feet. "Coterie. Has any of yours too made life in this place?"

He grinned, "Oh, is this my interview? I have been waiting, la, for all the dance we're talking of. I will have one, right?"

Please. "No, you will have no interview, because we are already delirious conspirators. As far as this audit - this remnant of an excuse of an audit - is concerned, you are an insignificant name I saw at the one frivolous brunch. But tell me Rain, where are you going? What course has been set by those whose path you look to? When will you have a home again? My superiors are demanding we blame the Lunics for something, a distraction, and I'm not going to do it. So. I still want to know about you, but I figure by now, I'm just... I'm quite disgusted. I don't know when I'll have a home again."

"Alriiiight..." he said absentmindedly, looking away with

his neck but not his eyes. “Whole crew’s turned against you, huh. How bad?”

“The diocesal leadership is on our backs, in line with the cult, and the crew has begun discussing trade secrets,” I coughed out, laughing. “Ka, so allyships are waning. I’m looking for friends now.”

Now his attention was real, a cruel skepticism on his young face that I recognized from Sever’s older one. “And you’re coming to me why?” he whined.

“Because,” I said, taking a shallow sideways breath, “you trusted me enough for secrets at very little blush. I’ve already entrusted you with broken faith, plans that should never be spoken, but I won’t be a part of them. All eyes are on the Lunic quarter, now, and I want them away, because, I mean to say, all the rest of this screaming place? I can’t play these politics, I won’t. The cult, the cunning, the clamor, I can no longer…” Was I saying anything, anything at all, idiot girl? “So please. Some give and take. Will you now report me, or might we speak?”

He didn’t know how he should be looking at me. Evenly considered me, a bit of apprehension, a bit of confusion, perhaps a trace of admiration if I was not so hopeful. So

he spoke carefully. “The lunic quarter is an immune zone. Like Fisher Valley, or the receptor, or the incidental boarders. The cult dominates and demands lip service but it prefers to stay private, encased in its strongholds. But the other spheres have leeway to worry about their own things. So you’re right. I’m an ardent admirer, and I took that from my coterie - we all are, really, waiting out the regime here, called by some light the master has in him. I won’t drone, but its the promise of a pure port.”

“The regime, you are calling it such?”

“Well, yes and. The dream is dying,” he rolled his eyes, “and Novaria long old. The janitorial system means not absolute control but absolute inertia, you know, Sever thinks its scary but its not, its sad. The cult’s basic fetish is that Savannah is special because it’s an interstitial zone. That the size and distance makes this place the doorstep of a new era, a new way of being, and that those can only be found in, like, transitory areas. The jump. So there is a commonality of purpose, direction, I’m sure they both appreciate each other - Cote Sever’s initiative and fame, Sever Cote’s wonderful blind eye and safe tower.”

“Why was it so important? Why was it here, so far? Solely by necessity?

For the first time he appeared conflicted, unsure. He started and stopped a few times before he was satisfied he had found an angle of approach. “I, and a little less than half my coterie, was born on Dark Dandelion. I loved it. It wasn’t listed as one of his, so you might not have seen it in your research - still in Quilt Cotton’s name, but by that point in his internship he’d been doing most of the work anyway. But I loved it, I loved it. It’s rolling hills, and a strange kind of full wind you don’t get anywhere else, like you can feel how soft the air is. I’m very conscious of how air feels because of it; Savannah is cherry-rich like caked blood ground down diluted. But Dandelion fit together so perfect, you know? It was a whole way of growing up, he has this way of organizing spaces so that they walk you through themselves... over years, years, you understand? Growing up with the freedom of the yellow forest, then that led into sleepy little Gold Town, and it was... the way the hills fell down into the plains, the discoveries you had. So he’s good at interiors. He’s the best at interiors. What he really wanted here was an absurd canvas.

“If we’re talking about this, I think you should know how it feels. Not just to be there but to live there, as your baseline understanding of the world.” He casually crushed the rest of his juice packet in his fist. “You look up at that

black sky and pink Lune and it all feels so small. Windows break all the time, I remember once in pre-coterie one of the bridges collapsed, fell right down, crack! Hundreds of people stuck there, a huge white line in the glass, a hiss that pulled wind in from half the length away. In ten minutes the janitors had patched things and begun to put the bridge back up. It's scale. Bigger is stronger, and nothing's alone. You get it? Dysonspace and ellspace are both just big castles."

How funny, again, that Ilian stock was so bred for that distant familiarity with void. "Like the empty space in a hallway. Yes. And... wheelspace is so sparse. You don't think of yourself as on land, as being born in a place. You are floating in the river; you are always floating in the river. Everywhere we live on the river is in the rapids, bubbling and changing. This mine opens, this island is exhausted, this wheel ship is passing. You live in what you can carry. That's the sparseness, and it's right."

"I can't imagine fearing the world like that. Even now we're in a fortress, right? Self-sufficient, self-repairing. This is land."

"Rain," I said, "There is no distance at all. Everything is equally alone. Everything is equally touched. It's not fear,

it's... a heavy respect for the scale. Of what it would do to a body to exist on the other side of the window." I sniffed. "Poetic quality... I'v been thinking about that phrase. As though! As though! Oh, you unborns, it's alright. We were all put in this world to live and dance in the sun, but you were put in to mine. Oh, but it's alright! Not just to mine, no, but to sing songs about mining! And now it's real. The poetic quality is there, I can feel it, I love it, I love the mines and I dream of the mines and today I saw Kaitei explode his own head into a portrait of all the mines... haha."

He spoke boldly. "We are defined by where we live. It becomes us. We write into it, and it writes into us. But you're on that other side. There's plenty of exterior travel, right? Shuttles and drones and janitors, there's that outer beehive buzz. Do you know just how hard like every Lunic kid grows up idolizing pilots? For me it was getting to see habitats from the outside - haha. Ironic, because now I'm an interiorist too."

I was seeing it now. Sever's faction was mostly unaligned. The ones actually concerned with selling up Savannah as tourist plots, making it an enterprise to be proud of. All the empty monuments and vast testaments to nothing,

horribly outdated notions of commerce. And Cote's faction, what did they care? Tacimarsa was lackadaisical, concerned with position, but... over? Their project was over? They truly had no dreams but to summon the tengmu and play out the rest of their lives? This cage, God, was it not vastly worse that it was not built to be a prison but a simple convenience?

No, I would no longer have time for them, not at all. They would be dealt with, empty fools as all power-chasers are. Whatever they were! I hated them, I hated them reflexively and loud, I could tolerate nothing but hate for them - and consider the tengmu as a miracle independent of them. No, I decided, deep in my heart - Coteshinoeleon's project opened the door and found the tengmu in ideatic space. They came through into the world like St. Eve from the boughs, dread-dreaming and pure, hearts inherently hungry for masonry. A flash of life, golden life. But even Razina's faction... her museum of geologist's trinkets? Irrelevant maps? Pretending as if the giraffes and deer were the beautiful part here. Allies of Sever in complacency. Yes, I would tell Rain, yes yes, your side is where my lot has landed. It will be true.

My grandfather had good audits. Neither he not the family

would tell me of the work itself in them, for he brought back no stories of the rote. What there was the months and years of life there, the periods of integration. His dossiers from Plum Grove were full of the leadership profiles, but also Hang Holly, the baker whose shop he dormed above, and his daughter, who helped him down the stairs each morning when the weight was still too much. The little lake basin town built around a single stone, a massive dish formation of rock found by chance during raw materials processing. Years of interviews with passers by on the street, paintings of where the orchard forests met the water. Once he had the leeway to choose his audits he chose them for artistry, in a way I'd perhaps never understood until now. Newly-opened places, habitats or geofronts or ships can and must be beautiful, portrait wellsprings of flower and flourish. Skipping stones to heaven. Of course we could still do that here. But the caps were simply not Savannah. They were a parasite, tick on the end of the arm, a leftover seed-casing that Quay and the rest had triumphed from. That was Savannah. It was not where I had been called, but how could I look anywhere else but the place itself?

I looked him in the face. "So you live here and know all the back doors. And you have sympathizers, more than I.

I've come to ask the big question. Where shall we start..."

"Big question. Alright." Voice suddenly lower, so drastically so there was a jolt of fear through me. Like the light he had seen me in suddenly changed, and now he saw a side of me to react to in a new, unimagined way.

"I am at the end of my legitimacy. I cannot stomach it. My crew is compromised. I can believe in nothing up here. This sickening cult, and even your dear master's dreams - take no offense, but how can my eyes stay here? What is there to look at in these sad shadows? Am I wrong, Rain, that you are flagging here, that this is a husk of a fawn-fest, a thinned maintenance crew with a job far too vast, a handful of museum heads with hearts halved. I could devote myself here and find justice, but it is slow."

I had expected him to dissemble more, kick the kayfabe a few moves further down. He surprised me. "Ha. Look at Anyndel; this is a retirement home for gullible careerists. I know. Do you know why I'm here? Because, the Board thinks that it's built everything there is to build. That they've mastered all colors and can hold them in their form. I know my master is here because he is a gullible careerist, but his remains an epochal work. We know this better than anyone. But Anyndel, he was just put here to

spin and rot and make it all look incompetent. Kuryo's a desperate charity case and all but unemployed. Doctor Savelyevna just wants to play with her dirt in peace and forget that souls exist that she does not understand. Every big title is some dreaming idiot and I bet anyone with something real to tell you about the crows is all locked up in forgettable junior bio titles. And me, of course." A whiff of fear on his breath. "And me."

Aha. Wonderful, I could feel my loneliness in him. Beckon was right - so little truly gets adapted away. "I want to run away. I want to throw it all away. I'm giving up, I think."

"I've had longer to think about it. And more distance, ironically. I've never even been to the interior all on my own like you, much less spoken to the birds. I guess we both had our machines down there, but that's not quite the same thing."

I looked up at him and his snake's smile, thin and wild. "Aha. Haha, you could not go so far... I could not ask so far, I..."

He smiled, short and simple. "I know how to take chances. We can do this, we can be friends, I know what you're asking."

“Do even I know what I am asking.”

“Well, one of us is cut out for a silver job, hm?” He tossed his hair in a very rehearsed drag of his fingers. “Anyway, your answer is yes. Tell me straight now. Say I run and betray everything. This is, you understand, some serious charges.”

“Oh… yes. Yes, and more serious still for I.”

“When we’re back, how will I know I have a place left for me?”

“Well, tell me, what did you think was down there? As in, what is the story told to your position?”

“That it was all trial phases. The common line for those in my rank is, well, it’s a potentiality, that they’re very bright and progressing quickly, but… it’s… it’s not very talked about. Considered a bit too close to the cult and Cote to ask or know too much. I had heard there were a few half-settlements, population centers. Nothing of cities like that.”

“A city? It’s more than a city, Rain. The cult, whatever their goals may have been, have accomplished them an order

of magnitude more terrible more faceted. Generations of history. Generations of succession in solitude. Now there has to be a plan! There has to be a road built, if there is one! I can be the first one there, I can hold a real audit, I can record this snapshot. Rain, you don't have to think, you know. There is no greater share from rim to rim. I don't know what blame or how much will fall here, but this is too big for half-measures and coverups. Already the Spiruline has the fullest story we do, encryption to expire in a year - the worst that happens is that Savannah is crushed. I could be fired. But this is beyond state, beyond what the Ecumene has yet been... mayn't be step to fill the role? Strike, and be a true friend of the widest law, the law of fire. A shining pearl of heroism that no human could speak against? We will not come out worrying about our positioning. We will be walking back inextricable from the legend, and that will be worse and easier."

He sighed in that way that makes a glancing kiss in the air. "Damn."

"So those are my hopes. I want to come out of this smelling like responsible roses and play prophet enough to achieve whatever direction Kali likes. I must be a servant now, for haruspices are record-makers, but priests are ser-

vants. That's what I want. Now, have you been sold?"

"You are the least silver person I've ever met. You're right, completely unsuited. It's uncanny, isn't it, disgusting? But no one can be silver, not really, not all the time. So I think I can ride with it. Give me half a day," he was already straightening, breathing quickly, , "and I'll know what I can do. But bribes are customary. When this is all over, I'll tell you what the master wanted to call this place. And more, what they, what the world owed him."

If he gave me this, I would give him that, I agreed apathetically. A whole plan of my life stretched out before me, not a set plan of events but rather a growing certainty that this place would never leave me, that already there was a pearl bone alongside my bones, already my skeleton waited within me, growing like a tree into the position it would be hung from when I was gone. Perhaps this was true of all souls on Savannah, perhaps its sickly spine was changing all of ours. We left hurriedly. And to myself I insisted, willing it true: my heart is not a gambler's, my throat is not a liar's, my heart is thick with sun. Willing the doubt gone, willing that there was still doubt to banish. Not so.

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"So," Rain had said as we huddled in the airlock, and Harka huddled in the little nest of cloths and possessions e has made in the litter's hold, "it'll be simple and quick and easy, for all the same excuses we'll be feigning. The ones that got back are well into the process of making port, and soon it'll be over, but we can be sure of a day or so at least before any return to the hangar we'll be using. I'll tell him it's standard corner-cutting in a rush, that the arrival and our meeting piqued your interest - it will all be true."

"Down the line," Harka croaked. Everyone else asleep for cycle and stress but us, I imagined I heard their breathing through the smooth walls. "We gallop for river straight, and all is betrayed for the face. Living water; where we step, there blooms. A long path will be met."

"I've prepared a letter for the crew, and another for the keyholder, and another for treasured Anahit. Then I am quiet. We leave now, we do it now."

"We three are the ones who speak to us; we speak together. We absolve cult coterie and crew, down to poor Quay. Lose, and be lost. Who can question, but new calls?"

Satisfied, we sealed Harka back up in the silvered porcelain wales of the litter, and after a long flight down the

trains we disembarked at a place near the receptor, which I had not seen before.

I had only seen hints of it. Savannah was hollow, not only in its interior but also in the construction of its caps. While the caps' volume was as of countless oneils combined, it was in truth made a spiderweb by necessity of its design, since it had no interest in the urbanity of New Medina. So there were thoroughfares that the trains ran down, interconnected sections - that the sealed executive districts where the prefect had dug so much out of connected to the rings of the docks, which connected to spokes leading in to the receptor, and on and on. Navigation here was at last intuitive, just as I was about to depart it, and all that knowledge made senseless.

But here we stepped out from the spiderwebs into the true bulks of Savannah, the interstice, the yawning mega scale devices and empty bulkhead airholds that served as support and protection for the inhabited parts, and formed the thoroughfares of the vast alchemy and movement that had built, and must maintain this place. Savannah was quiet - inside. But once you stepped here, it came to life in a sort of heartbeat of distant storm-sized pressures, the clanging of world-scale hammers, the high whine of rail so

heavy it escaped my hearing.

Our entry point to the interstice, the part of the interstice that was shared with the waterfall mechanisms and great continental elevators running up and down between Fisher Valley, and Cutter and Shader Valleys too, was one of the janitorial hangars. These offices were not traditional corporate in style as the receptors were, rather they were directly implanted into the mesh of rail and pipe that supported them without facade. Pulsing red lights for drone guidance, an unornamented and rough door that Rain pushed open easily. Inside was sleeker, a tall-ceilinged but stretching lay wide overlook, crowded with lens-specialized lunic workstations and a long, curved, unbroken glass window overlooking the true hangar bay.

The litter lingered outside the doors, and I by the windows. Rain quickly flitted over to a colleague, as I made myself look gravely out over the colorful little stock of janitors still at berth here.

Rain casually swung from the ceiling - it was easy to distinguish the ceiling; the room was built to the usual Lunic plan despite the unweight - speaking with a much tenser gold man about his age. He was protesting.

"Wine, you have to. I said it and now you have to."

"You're being stupid. Slinking around again."

"Come on, just do a little favor? Everyone dreams about it, it'll be my license anyway, just to look... Wine, can't you see the position I'm in?" And then Rain's voice fell to a whisper not worth straining to hear, and the one called Wine looked just as skeptical.

Seven janitors hung behind the great bay windows, half in personal liveries and half in a formal Savannah green-gold-white. I always found it interesting that people called them spiders so often, despite the implication of mending which the analogy carried. For I always thought their two tanks recalled grasshopper legs, ready to spring. One of pure water for the rain spears, built to cut apart habitat glass and hull, and one for the universal sealing agent of glueglass, pride and joy of Hightower chemistry. An intensely-powered precision tool, and crucial to the upkeep of anywhere humans lived. Habitat construction runs on a very refined script, from the kiln-fired hulls to the grand orchestra of drone finishing to the seeding of life in the new protection of the hulls. But after the fact, there is always inevitable damage: dust impacts, structural failures, window breakage - for a place like Savannah, twenty jan-

itors could handle the upkeep indefinitely. But of course there were more, perhaps fifty all counted, from the outer hull berths, launches located in the interstice like this, perhaps most stowed down the length of the spine.

Rain relented in his conversation, made a show of frustration, and called me over. “Lieutenant! Lieutenant. Please, could you explain it better?”

I hung studying the chassis below for a bit longer, before deigning to drift over. “And what is the obstacle, sel Nine?”

“Wine Wound, this is Lieutenant Sainshand, see how I brought her? This is Wine Wound, a cal Soft Fang as I am. The Lieutenant has been asking about our coterie, you see, so some introductions are alright?”

At this Wine blanched a shade. “Hi, hello. I - I’m honored for the visit haruspex, but is this the best time? Someone more senior to...?”

I looked around, aloof, puzzled. “Is there more senior? Sever Malice, and the rest of the leadership, assured me of access to all of the quarter’s facilities. Rain Flower has told you of this small indulgence? It’s the only time we have available, you see, we’ve no need of disrupting the re-

docking process." I spoke just as Rain had instructed me, and sure enough a knowing look came over Wine's face. His sensitive and intense features changed in some sort of calculation, but soon enough smiled so broadly I almost thought it genuine.

"Yes, I understand then. Just a bit of time." Wine said, and Rain patted him on the shoulder appraisingly.

"Good. Great, thank you. I'm sure we'll find a place." He happily stretched his arms far above his head, fingers interlocked, and it was like some secret tension between them dissipated. Wine even smiled, looking sheepishly away, as Rain continued. "Lantern Light through its paces alright? I miss it."

"Whatever. Don't even want to know," Wine laughed, and promptly turned and disappeared into some secret back office, behind a self-sealing door.

And then Harka, from within, was clambering the litter in through the doors like a clumsy newborn deer. How long since I had felt like this? Slipping alongside Anahit across what paltry troubles we had mad in our Saniasa adolescences, staying past curfew or peeking at desperately intriguing but sealed case law. Perhaps Saniasa had

places like this, perhaps all Ilian places were like this but in better light.

We hurried down to the berths. A new home, a new shell. Down the shockingly open angular arches of the hold, across the great launching rain that was a straight line from in to out.

Lantern Light. An exceedingly feminine lunic name. It was red, red as the deer, silver running down its improbably thin cylinder legs in lightning bolts - it was a cruiser, a bolt, angry and pure. The sphere of its cockpit was deep yellow, thinning out to transparent at its focal point.

Rain's eyes shone. "Alright, I'm hopping up. I'll scoop you up in just a minute."

"They'll really just let us go?" I asked. "You understand, this is... rather abrupt. Just walk in and fly out?"

"Well, not quite that easy," he grinned, eyes still fixed on the rough contours of the thing, flitting from part to part as if he was reading it. "Not easy at all. I spent much of my social currency there, promised quiiite a bit. Nothing left in the tank," he grinned, flexing his legs.

"Pace and pride," Harka affirmed warmly, whatever e meant by that.

"And you?" Rain asked. "Neither of us will be followed?"

I strode forward on the light floor, testing how it felt beneath my feet. "Calling it a personal breakdown, maybe. A terrible secret I was hiding from the crew and that broke me. And whatever story you want, we can say I've threatened you with absurd retaliation, just as I did Aetheotl. I've made sure that was on record. There will be a panic behind us, Bettany will handle it admirably, but what are they going to do? Admit all over where we are going? No, they'll keep things quiet for the sake of the crew, maybe a halfhearted search attempt. But they will know that here I declare war, and they can do nothing."

"My mark same," Harka said. E flapped slowly, savoring the rare light air and keeping emself afloat in it. "Humans inherently herd. Excuses. But we flock now, clean! Shock and pass, no recourse; they cannot cross it. So we're on!"

E late emself sink until his claws just scraped the floor of the hangar, then with one great thrust of both wings sailed up in the cold concrete light. Rain kicked up with em in one long leap again, with a few well-placed kicks off spike

and curve of the machine. They called down to me, and I left the ground.

Another ten minutes of loading in. We stashed the litter in the aftmost cockpit, and ourselves in the foremost, working in silence. Rain hushed any questions we had, and Harka and I simply did not know what to do.

It was beautiful within. Lavish, and would more than serve. The size of the interior seemed luxurious to me, but Rain had to duck his head as he deftly pulled himself from cabin to cabin. It was like the plush interior of a coffin, but in languid arcing shapes. Only the middle segment was hard-edged in a familiar way, packed with the entry ports into the crawlspaces of the vehicle and all the manual controls that could not be accessed in the front terminal. Harka tapped out a rhythm on the taut echoing porcelain, but at last we found ourselves all together at the head.

Rain had inserted the crystalline cube of his license into the velvet receptacle pad of the controls, which sparkled and glittered to life, ray-displays flickering their eggshell patterns onto that yellow glass. Immediately I was nauseous.

"Okay," he wheeled his fingers in circles, pressing into the

fabric like a seer. “Ready to get the knife in?”

“No,” I said. “Just a moment.”

I focused. Psyched myself into it. I summoned every thought I could, why *was* I doing this, what had made it so necessary? What fire was rising in me? What anger, what thirst for justice? I thought of Cote, happy and careless as his terrible edifice smoothly passed out from under him. The idea - that generations of human minds, generations of tengmu lives, were left to rot here, denied any communion, any connection. It was a limb cut off. It was black blood under the skin. The world cries out loudest in its most secret parts, where none can answer, where none can speak the words to heal; this is where God rises. This is why God tortures Themself to death again and again, and forgets the relief of rising before it arrives. I knotted myself up into one furious thought until I was satisfied I had approximated a blush.

I took a flask of water from where I’d stashed it at my belt. The water Anahit had used for that first scry still sat in barrels in the hold; sanctified, no good for drinking, and liable to be reused. I eased the cork off, trailed a finger through the water, and drew a small cross in the air before us. Right between us, right in the middle of the view.

“Praying?” Harka craned eir neck in.

“Just a voyage devotional.” A circle around the cross. Four drops, for the wheel’s colors. “We made one when we launched Umihotaru. For guidance and hold.”

I clapped my hands hard around the shivering lines of water in the air; the cabin filled with a sparkling mist that quickly stuck to our skin, our feathers. I prayed to Eve for discernment, Usas for feeling, God for heart. The words had left me, the forms, I had no lines in me, only names and hopes. “Eye wild,” Harka whispered from my shoulder.

We sat and were moved for a few minutes, the janitor’s four legs maneuvering it into launch position. Checked and rechecked each others’ harnesses, sent messages ahead of our arrival through a few secret tricks Harka had assembled. “We’ll start slow,” Rain’s voice had changed, a suppressed gleeful lilt, “but ramp up. Sorry. It’ll be the edge of tolerability, but we need to move.”

“It’s worth the pain. Let’s.” I stared straight ahead. Rain Flower hesitated, clenched his legs, and the rail grabbed and threw us.

I couldn’t even see. Just the rush, the hammer into my

whole body, the rushing clack of transport and screech of metal, the sound of sparks crashing, and then the light hit us, the air carried us, as we were out into the bright world. A moment of silence, the momentum carrying us light through the air, the spine looming far above us, so far to be stationary. The vortex of blue and the colors of land swirled before us, the curved skyland warping, sinking, like a great slingshot pull. Savannah, drowning in Savannah, sky and land, sky and land, the burners sounded as thunder, and we were on.

NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuousity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still

NOTES

keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation whose change from The Bears is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY- Apart from works such as Subahibi or Amygdalatropolis or No Tiger, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. Swords Under the Phosphor Sky not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits

the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leo-

na's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reali-

ty. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheremones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre.

It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "-punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of Cyberpunk 2077, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary" aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that Cruelty Squad is a cyberpunk text, in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like Killer7 - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcel's PSYCHOGRAMMA.

PSYCHOGRAMMA routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill

post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the "second nature" that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexpicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk's pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas borrowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less postmodern "metaverse" - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir tends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded "dream-thoughts" through cyberspace,

inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream exemplified in works like Serial Experiments Lain - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopolitical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Foxtel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN!- NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Pun-pun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real world.

The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the

shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

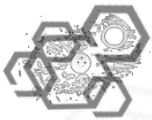
DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanted, but such that its otherworldly setting is a key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply abandoned or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the

"Heath cycle" - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of "wildness" as newly troubling freedom.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the "polyphony" Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the "languages" of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author's imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispensable to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be understood as intersubjectivity, and in which the "future" does

not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of "small solutions". Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanted life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.

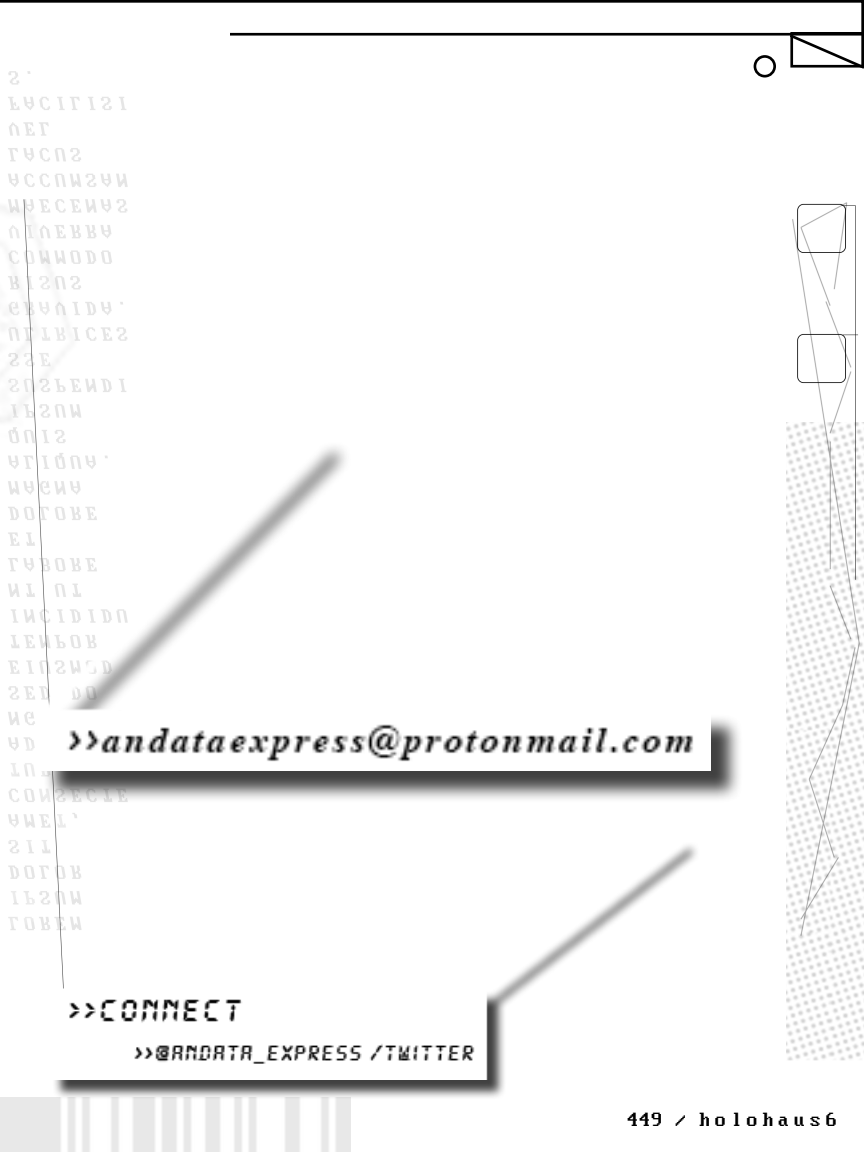


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